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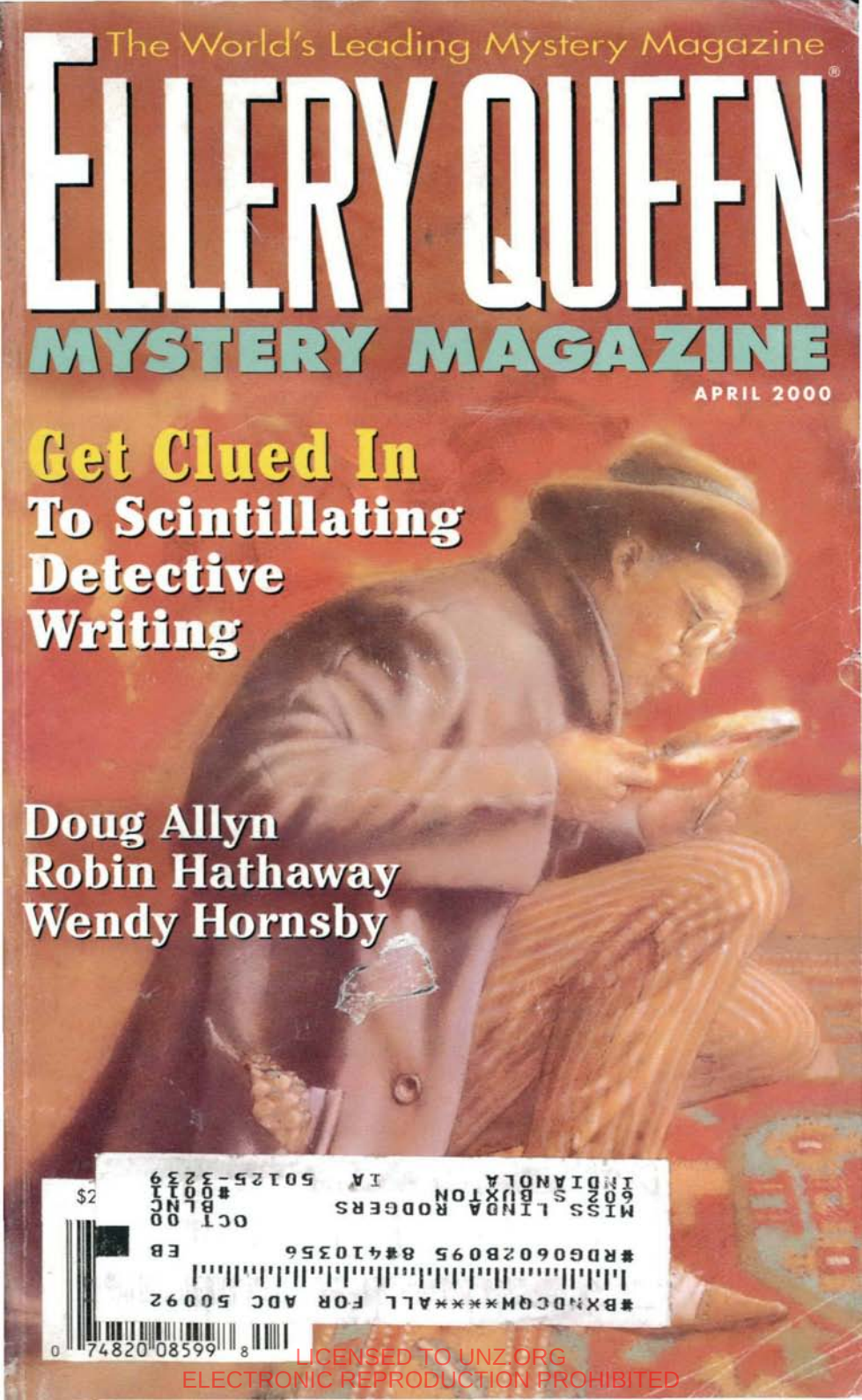

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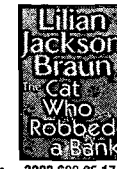

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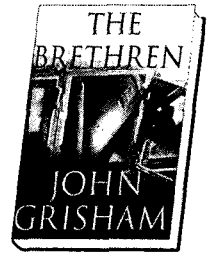

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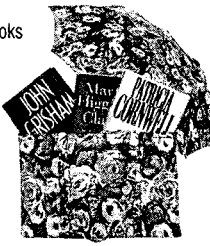

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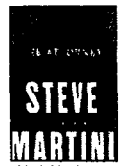

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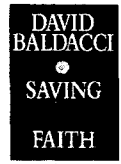

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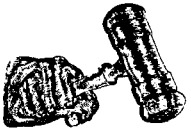

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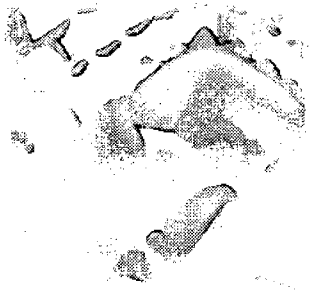
COLIN DEXTER

THE REMORSE-FUL DAY



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Art by Darryl Elliott

The Death Row Pet Show

by Doug Allyn

Dog pounds. Animal shelters. Pet centers. Call them what you like. I don't like them.

Oh, I know they're necessary. As a small-town veterinarian I'm well aware of society's need to deal with displaced or surplus pets. But I'm also attuned to the moods and personalities of my animal patients. And every time I visit the dog pound, animal shelter, whatever, sadness seems to hover in the air like smoke over a crematorium.

Lost, strayed, or simply dumped, the animals in shelters all have one thing in common. They'd rather be somewhere else.

So would I.

Maybe its the architecture. The Quad-County Animal Control Shelter reminds me of every *film noir* prison movie I've ever seen; a gray, concrete-block building with stainless-steel cages.

©2000 by Doug Allyn

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San Quentin for pets.

Most veterinarians in Michigan's Quad Counties (Saginaw, Bay, Midland, and Algoma) are on the volunteer list at the shelter. They seldom call us. Shelter personnel can cope with most routine animal ailments. Complex or contagious medical conditions are also dealt with promptly. Permanently. By lethal injection.

Again, I understand the necessity. I also understand hunger in Bangladesh. But I don't like it.

With his first collection of Westbrook stories, *All Creatures Dark and Dangerous* (Crippen & Landru), just recently released, Doug Allyn sat down to write another entry in the series. This time it turned out to be a dark tale, moving because of the author's great compassion for animals. Mr. Allyn is a four-time winner of *EQMM's* Readers Award.

Still, when I got a call asking me to stop by for an emergency consultation, I went. Frankly, I was curious. I couldn't imagine what would constitute an emergency at a dog pound.

The shelter was just closing as I entered, uniformed personnel filing out. A red-haired, rangy fella rose from behind the information desk. "Can I help you?" He was a head taller than I, but I doubt he outweighed me by much. Freckle-faced, he had an easy smile.

"I'm Dr. Westbrook. I had a call from—"

"Liam McKenna," he interrupted, offering his hand. "I'm the new director of the shelter. Red, to my friends. Thanks for coming in."

"Call me Dave." His handshake was firm, but not a contest. "What's this about?"

"They say a picture's worth a thousand words, Doctor. This way, please." McKenna escorted me to a locked door marked SECURE AREA. DANGER! NO ADMITTANCE! I raised an eyebrow but he just smiled blandly, unlocked the door, and waved me through.

The warning signs were absolutely valid. The room was a kennel, but instead of the usual chain-link kennels, the dogs were caged separately in individual concrete cells. For obvious reasons. The dogs were pit bulls, Rottweilers, and Dobermans, all bearing the savage scars of fighting.

The warrior dogs showed intense interest in me as I passed their cells but I wasn't worried. I've dealt with fighters before. They're far more dangerous to each other than to humans.

"I'd like you to examine the lady Lab there at the table," McKenna said quietly. "Tell me what you think."

There seemed to be nothing remarkable about the golden Labrador retriever female shivering fearfully beside a stainless-steel examination table against the wall. A beautiful dog, she appeared to be two or three years old, approximately eighty

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pounds. Sleek, healthy, and well cared for.

That's what made her scars so impossible to understand.

The dog had been branded. Someone had burned a swastika, a Nazi cross, into the flesh of each of her shoulders. The Lab cowered as I knelt to examine her. I didn't blame her a bit.

This was no prank. The scars were layered, burns upon burns. Whoever did this had taken his time, making sure the scarring would be so deep that the skin could never regenerate.

Permanent scars, impossible to erase. And it had been done recently. Some of the lesions were still raw.

"Easy girl, easy," I murmured, stroking her gently as I moved around her. Shifting her tail, I examined her vagina, then knelt to check her mammary glands. No burns or other injuries. There were abrasions around her muzzle, though, and just above her paws, indicating her legs and jaws had probably been tied. While she was being tortured.

As I reached for her collar I noticed my hands were shaking. I wanted to punch somebody. Or something.

The dog's nametag read: "Daisy Mae. Ben and Sandra Feiger." A Saginaw address and phone number. I glanced up at McKenna.

"Have you talked to the owners yet?"

"They didn't do this, Doc." McKenna's affable smile had vanished. His gray eyes were the color of Lake Huron in January. And just as cold.

"Are you sure?"

"The Feigers are Jewish. And unfortunately, Daisy here isn't the first dog we've found."

"You've found others branded like this?"

"Not like this one exactly. The swastika is a new twist. But the dogs had definitely been burned the same way. First one turned up dead in a dumpster about six weeks ago. The second was thrown on the owner's lawn, also dead."

"How were they killed?"

"Shot in the head. Pellet gun at close range. Twenty-two caliber. The first dog's muzzle was tied shut with clothesline. No rope on the second but there were marks."

"This one has abrasions too, probably tied the same way while she was branded. Are there any connections among the owners?"

"They don't know each other. Their homes are on the west side a few miles apart, but that's about it."

"What does Feiger do?"

"High-school teacher. English."

I considered that a moment. "Any chance the owners of the first two dogs have kids in high school?"

"Very good, Doc," McKenna nodded grimly. "People told me you were sharp. Both families have teenagers at Washington Carver

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High. But they're not in Feiger's English class."

"If you already know that, why am I here?"

"We may need expert testimony about the dog's injuries. Any moron can see she's been tortured, but a judge might prefer a medical description from a veterinarian to an opinion from a dog-catcher. You'll be paid, of course. The county has a fund for—"

"Don't worry about the money," I said, scratching Daisy Mae behind the ears. "Anything I can do, just let me know."

"What about her brands? Can anything be done about them?"

"I'll give her a shot to prevent infection and apply some antibiotic salve to the wounds, but that's about it. After she heals, we can try transplanting skin from her hips to break up the design, but it would take more hide than she's got to cover it completely. Whoever burned her made sure the scars would be permanent. Any idea who it might be?"

"Not yet. We're probably dealing with a psycho juvenile who goes to Carver High, which narrows it down to about a thousand kids. As ugly as this is, animal abuse is still just a ninety-day misdemeanor. With teenyboppers blastin' each other over tennis shoes, it's tough to get cops worked up about a few dogs."

"This isn't about the dogs," I said, trying to get my anger under control. "It's about...evil. It would take a monster to do a thing like this."

"Even if it's probably a kid?"

"Hitler and Jack the Ripper were both kids once. Don't you have any leads at all?"

"No, but maybe we will soon. He seems to be gettin' braver."

"How do you mean?"

"He hid the first dog's carcass in a dumpster. Left the second body on the owner's lawn. And this one . . ." McKenna shook his head. "He left Daisy here tied to the rail on the Feigers' front porch so the family would find her like this. He's one warped bastard. And he's raisin' the bar a little each time. If we don't find him he'll be workin' over people next."

"If he isn't already. What will happen to the dog, Red? Will the Feigers take her back?"

"They say no, and I can't blame 'em. They've got small children. Bad enough a thing like this happens at all without bein' reminded of it every day. I'd put her on TV but it might encourage a copycat."

"On TV?"

"The Death Row Pet Show."

"The what?"

"It's a program I started just after I took the job as director. We call it *The Death Row Pet Show.* I go on Saginaw's public-access channel every Saturday wearin' a black leather executioner's mask. I show a dozen animals we've held for forty days and I tell folks they're stuck on death row and their time's runnin' out. Peo-

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ple call in and we've been placin' about ten animals a week in new homes, mostly dogs, but cats too."

"And how many do you euthanize?"

"Too many. All told, we recycle about a hundred animals per month into the community. And we destroy twice that number."

"Tough job. Not one I could do."

"It's not a task I care for either, but it's necessary. I'm no bleedin' heart, I grew up on a farm near Muskegon and farm animals don't generally die of old age. But farmin's no fit trade anymore. Too corporate. Pigs born in cages they never leave till the day they're gutted by machines. It's enough to make a man a vegetarian. Animals die at the shelter too, but at least here I can ease their passin' a little. When I took this job they were still gassing 'em. I canned that on my first day. We do it by injection now. It's more humane, but it's still not easy."

"Maybe it shouldn't be."

"Damned right it shouldn't. And we do our best to save as many as we can. Maybe we'll even find Daisy a home after she heals up. These other poor devils"—Red gestured toward the caged, battle-scarred pits and Rotts—"they haven't a prayer."

"Fighting dogs?"

"Yeah. Cops busted a dogfighting ring near Midland a month ago. Arrested forty people, seized a dozen dogs, half of 'em so badly torn up we destroyed them on the spot."

"Why are you keeping these? Fighting dogs—"

"—can never be safely returned to the community. Believe me, Doc, I know. Once they've been blooded in the ring they're touchy as time bombs ever after. Anything can set 'em off. The only reason they're still alive is that their owner, Kiki Garces, is a heavyweight dope dealer."

"What's that got to do with anything?"

"It seems this Garces fella is practically a poster boy for *America's Most Wanted.* The feds haven't been able to nail him on drug charges so they decided to prosecute him under the Michigan sport-fighting statute. A four-year felony, plus fines and restitution."

"Pretty heavy fall."

"If it ever happens." Red sighed. "The trial isn't for another six months. Meanwhile, I have to keep these boyos available as evidence. I've tried not to grow too fond of 'em but it's not easy. The hell of it is, Garces and his sleazeball pals are free on bail while these poor buggers are stuck on death row."

"Sounds like a raw deal."

"No worse than this lady got," McKenna said, patting Daisy Mae. "Workin' animal control, I've seen some ugly things, but this? Makes you want to turn in your membership card for the human race. Can you tell me anything at all about what happened to her?"

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"Not much. The burns were inflicted at different times, which means she was held for a while. Any idea where?"

"No. She was dumped at the Feiger house. He called the police and they called us. Why?"

"See these reddish marks on her legs and hindquarters? They're rust spots. She has rust embedded in her pads as well. A lot of it."

"Like from a rusty vehicle?"

"Possibly, but I doubt this could have been done in a car or truck. Even muzzled, she must have made a lot of noise. More likely, she was held in a building or a shed with a lot of rust on the floor. An old factory or machine shop, maybe. Something like that."

"I don't think there are any old buildings near the Feiger home. They live in a new subdivision."

"What about the dumpster where you found the first dog? If your guy hid the first body because he was afraid of being spotted, maybe he didn't tote the carcass very far."

"Could be." McKenna nodded, brightening. "The dumpster's on the southeast side. There are a couple of abandoned factory complexes nearby, but it'd take an army to search 'em all."

"Or just one dog," I said grimly. "Maybe Daisy can show us where it happened."

We took my battered Jeep. McKenna drove while I sat in the back with Daisy, murmuring to her in low tones. Adult Labradors are a stout-hearted breed, tough, tenacious, and bright. Daisy was all of that, yet as we neared the abandoned factory complex off South Williams Boulevard, she gradually grew more agitated.

Dogs have an inborn sense of direction, a combination of memory, scent, and sensibilities we humans are only vaguely aware of. They've been known to cover thousands of miles to return to their homes. No maps, no radar, no technology. Sometimes man's claim to be a superior species rings a tad hollow.

Daisy's growing uneasiness told me we were in the right vicinity, but it was only when she suddenly dropped to the floor of the Jeep, cowering in terror, that I knew we'd arrived.

"Here," I told McKenna. "Make a right."

He pulled into the driveway, stopping at the heavy chain that blocked it halfway down. The building itself was an ancient yellow-brick monstrosity, stained by age and pollution. Three stories tall, its windows were boarded shut or painted black, eyeless and abandoned. Weeds sprouted through the buckled blacktop parking lot like a teen's scraggly whiskers.

"Let's leave the Jeep and the dog a few blocks away," I suggested. "We won't need Daisy to search, and there's no point in frightening her more than we have already."

After leaving the Jeep behind a mom-and-pop party store,

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McKenna and I made our way back to the abandoned factory. A sign above the entrance said *Lachlan Machine Tool, established 1938.* It didn't say when the place had folded, but it had obviously been awhile.

"Perfect spot," Red observed, glancing around. "Most of the neighborhood houses are as deserted as the factory. You could move an army in here without attracting attention."

"But first you'd have to get inside," I said, tugging on the massive front door handle. Locked. "This place looks pretty well buttoned up to me."

"All we need is one opening. Let's work our way around in opposite directions. Sing out if you spot anything."

It was easier than we expected. Circling the building, trying doors and windows, I happened to glance across the empty parking lot and noticed some of the weeds poking through the blacktop had been trampled underfoot. It didn't take Daniel Boone to realize the haphazard path led directly to a side door.

Solid metal, with no windows, it appeared to be intact, but it opened easily with a light tug. I yelled for Red and we went in together. A small anteroom opened into a giant factory floor the size of a high-school gym. Red whistled softly.

"You could play football in here," I said, looking around.

The ceiling was a full sixty feet above us, with vent fans rotating slowly in the murk overhead. Though the building's windows had been painted over, skylights in the roof gave the room an autumnal glow. Kneeling, Red brushed his fingertips through the dust on the floor, then held them up to show me. A definite red-orange tint. Rust.

"They probably did some kind of metal-grinding operation in here," he said. "Twenty years ago this was steel dust. Solid rust now."

"But somebody's been here recently. Check out the footprints in the dust, see? They seem to lead toward that workbench against the back wall."

The area around the bench was too scuffed to tell us much. Except that some of the prints clearly belonged to a dog.

Angrily, Red began rifling the drawers. On the third one, pay dirt. He hauled out an ordinary cardboard box, two feet square, eight inches tall. He opened it, then swallowed, motioning me over. The contents seemed innocent enough. A length of clothesline, rubber gloves, a yellow raincoat. And a common propane torch, the kind Joe Homeowner would use to solder plumbing.

Or to torture a helpless animal.

The torch was leaning against a thin vinyl-covered book.

McKenna tilted the box to read the title.

"Carver High Woodchopper," he murmured. "High-school yearbook."

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"Is there a name inside?"

"Probably, but I don't want to touch anything. Fingerprints might—" He broke off, listening. "Did you hear something?"

In the sudden silence, the only sound was the squeak of the overhead fans. Then a thump as someone pulled the outside door open. We glanced at each other, then, without a word, moved into the shadows against the wall.

The newcomer was halfway across the room before he realized we were there. I couldn't believe it. I'd been expecting a monster, Quasimodo or Frankenstein or some kind of psycho street person.

Instead we had a tall, fair, well-groomed youth in a Michigan State sweater, Dockers, and deck shoes. He looked as fresh and scrubbed as a teen model for J.C. Penney.

Except that this particular teen angel was dragging a reluctant basset hound toward the workbench by a leash.

He froze, startled, when he realized he wasn't alone.

"Well, well," McKenna said softly, stepping into the light. "What have we here?"

"What you've got is a juvenile-court judge's worst nightmare," Shamika Parker said. We were in a conference room at the Saginaw County Courthouse. A pert café-au-lait woman, her hair braided in tight cornrows, Shamika scarcely seemed old enough to vote. But she'd been an assistant district attorney for the city of Saginaw through three administrations, and her dark eyes were as hard and piercing as chipped flints.

"Justin Hagen is an honor student," she continued. "He has no criminal record, not even a traffic citation. His father, Gerald Hagen, is a respected corporate attorney. His mom's not only a Dodge family heiress, she's in a wheelchair. Arthritis."

"I don't care if she's the queen freakin' mum," McKenna snapped. "This case is the worst example of animal abuse I've ever seen and it should be a slam dunk, Parker. We caught young Justin in the act."

"Did you? That's not how he tells it."

"Then he's a damned liar and that's one of his good points!" Red shot back.

"Whoa up, you two," I interjected. "Save it for the hearing. Am I missing something here, Miss Parker? I thought this show-cause hearing was only a formality."

"It usually is. In most juvenile cases the parents don't even bother to show up. This is no ordinary case. Justin's father is here, and he's retained Wes Carmichael to defend the boy."

"He's not a boy," Red said bitterly, "he's a damned prodigy. They have 'em in everything from math to gymnastics. Why not evil? No *boy* could have done what he did."

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"But first we have to prove it, Red," Shamika said. "He's not guilty yet and you have to remember that. I don't want any tirades about animal abuse on the stand."

"What about the evidence we found?" I asked.

"It's fairly strong," she admitted. "We have Justin Hagen's fingerprints on the raincoat, the torch, and the yearbook."

"Then that's it, right? You've got him."

"Not quite. He admits the items belong to him but claims they were stolen. And the yearbook isn't his. It belonged to the owner of the second dog you found, Tiffany Carter. It doesn't actually prove anything."

"But you said Justin's prints were on the book?"

"He claims he signed it for her at school and his signature's there. They're apparently friends. Carmichael's calling her as a defense witness, and the other boy too, Chester Nowicki, the owner of the first dog."

"Witnesses?" Red frowned. "At a show-cause hearing?"

"I told you this is not an ordinary case. If I had half a brain, I'd plead it out and cut a deal to let the kid walk if they'd agree to get him some counseling."

"Then why don't you?" Red asked.

"Because I saw the pictures of those dogs! And I don't believe torturing animals is the equivalent of shoplifting, even if the law says it is. Besides, Wes Carmichael won't even consider a deal. The boy says he's innocent, and his family is backing him a hundred percent. Either we nail him today or he walks."

"I don't understand," I said. "Haven't they seen the evidence? Don't they know he was dragging another dog into that . . . torture chamber? A stolen dog?"

"He says he found it tied by the side door, didn't think it should be there, and went inside to see what was going on."

"And they believe him?"

"Probably. They went through something like this three years ago. Don't you remember the Hagen kidnapping case?"

"You're kidding," Red said. "It's the same family?"

"I only moved to the area last year," I said. "What are you talking about?"

"The Hagens had a daughter, two years younger than Justin. She disappeared from her schoolyard. A teacher thought he saw her with Justin, so the police hauled him in and questioned him. Intensely."

"What happened?"

"A lot, but not to Justin Hagen. He was innocent. The trouble was, he gave the police a phony alibi. When they caught him in the lie, my boss—my *former* boss—went public with it and all but convicted the kid in the press."

"But he didn't do it?"

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"Not a chance. He was in drug rehab at the time, locked down. He lied about his whereabouts to protect his family. The girl was never found, and the case cost my ex-boss his job. So if there's any wiggle room at all, the judge will probably give this kid the benefit of the doubt. Understood? Now let's go, we'd better not be late."

Ordinarily, courtrooms rank next to dog pounds as my least favorite places. Nothing good has ever happened to me in one. Juvenile court doesn't look so bad, though. On TV, courtrooms are grand, intimidating temples, marble columns, tiled floors. Saginaw County juvy court looked like an insurance-company conference room. Two long Formica conference tables faced the judge's desk. Desk, not bench. No chairs for spectators, press, or anyone else. In Michigan, all juvenile proceedings are closed.

Justin Hagen and his father were seated at one table with a pudgy gentleman in a tailored Armani suit. Hagen senior looked like he'd just come from a funeral—dark suit, dark tie, dark looks for Red and me.

His lawyer, Wes Carmichael, looked every inch a winner, sterling-silver hair in an immaculate pompadour, ruddy, golf-course complexion, sleek as a Pomeranian at a rest home.

He was talking to Justin as Red, Shamika, and I took our seats. The boy glanced up at me a moment before turning back to his lawyer. There was something oddly familiar in his stare, though I was sure I'd never seen him until the day at the factory.

The kid looked like he'd come to sit for his class picture: Carver letterman's sweater over a white shirt, no tie. I'd worn a suit at Shamika's request, but it had seen better days and my clip-on tie didn't match any color combination known to man.

The judge came in with a heavyset black deputy in his wake. We rose as he took his seat.

"Hear ye, hear ye," the deputy intoned. "The District Court for the County of Saginaw is now in session, the Honorable Judge Harold Jackmon presiding."

"Be seated." Jackmon waved us to our chairs. Pudgy and florid, with thinning gray hair combed over the dome, he looked like an ex-jock going to seed.

He knew his job though. After noting that it was a show-cause hearing, not a trial, he quickly heard Shamika's recitation of the facts and glanced through a photographic record of the evidence. He asked Red a few questions about the first dogs he'd found, then asked me about the condition of Daisy Mae. None of us took the stand, we simply rose and answered his questions briefly. Nervous, I stumbled a bit at first, but it passed.

When I resumed my seat, the judge mused a moment, tapping a pencil on his desk. Then cleared his throat.

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"At this point I'm inclined to rule that the prosecution has offered sufficient cause to justify a formal hearing—"

"Objection, Your Honor," Carmichael interrupted, rising.

"I thought there might be," Jackmon said mildly. "What grounds, Mr. Carmichael?"

"Insufficient evidence, Your Honor. I know this is only a show-cause hearing, but considering the difficulties the Hagen family has already suffered—"

"I'm aware of the history, Wes," the judge interrupted. "While I regret the Hagen family's troubles, I fail to see the relevance to this case."

"The link is simple injustice, Your Honor. Justin Hagen was unjustly held up to public vilification three years ago. I'd like to prevent a recurrence if possible. I have two witnesses and a few questions. Twenty minutes, no more."

"I'll hold you to that, Wes. Proceed."

"I call Chester Nowicki to the stand."

A bailiff brought the boy in. He looked more like a working stiff than a high-school kid. Faded jeans, green flannel shirt buttoned to the throat, scuffed brogans, hair the color of moldy hay, wide-eyed and jumpy as a chipmunk on amphetamines.

The deputy swore Nowicki in and he took a seat by the judge's desk. Carmichael rose, but didn't approach him.

"Chester, do you know my client, Justin Hagen?"

"I know who he is, sure."

"You attend the same school, is that right?"

Nowicki nodded.

"Answer aloud, please, Mr. Nowicki," Jackmon said.

"Oh, sorry. Yeah, we go to the same school."

"Do you have any classes together?"

"No."

"Have you ever had problems with him? Trouble of any kind?"

"No."

"Do you know of any reason Justin Hagen might want to hurt you by killing your dog?"

"No."

Nowicki looked at the floor, clearly wishing himself somewhere else. I sympathized.

"Thank you. No more questions." Carmichael sat down.

"Miss Parker?" the judge prompted.

"Just one question. Chester, do you understand the psychopathic motivations in the psychopathic mutilation of a helpless animal?"

The boy blinked. "What?"

"Never mind. Withdrawn. No more questions, Your Honor."

"Thank you, Mr. Nowicki," the judge said gently. "You may step down." Chester stared at him, baffled.

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"You're done, son," the deputy added. "You can go home."

Nowicki rose and hurried out, glowering at Shamika as he passed.

Carmichael rose. "Call Tiffany Carter, please."

The bailiff opened the door and a girl swept in—dark skirt, white blouse, and an oversized Carver High letterman's jacket. Cheerleader, I thought. Golden blond, slim, with perfect teeth. And well aware of it. The deputy swore her in and she took the chair, carefully arranging her skirt as she sat.

"Miss Carter?" Carmichael rose. "Do you know this young man beside me? Justin Hagen?"

"Sure. Hi, Justin." She waved.

"Hi, Tiff."

"I take it you've had no problems with Justin?"

"Not a one. Except that he keeps jacking up the class curve in algebra."

"But he would have no reason to wish you harm? Or your dog?"

The girl hesitated, but only for a heartbeat. "No. None at all. We're buds."

"I see. And do you know the previous witness, Chester Nowicki?"

"I guess I've seen him around school. We don't exactly hang with the same crowd."

"You have no classes together?"

"Hardly. He's special ed."

"Special—?"

"You know, special education. They aren't retards exactly, but . . . well, you know."

"Special ed," Carmichael nodded. "Yes, I do know. Thank you. No more questions."

"Any questions, Miss Parker?" Jackmon asked.

"Miss Carter," Shamika said, smiling. "Tiffany. Maybe this is just a girl thing, but I noticed you hesitated a split second when Mr. Carmichael asked if you'd ever had trouble with Justin. What was that about?"

"Nothing. I just . . ."

"What? Tell us, please."

"Justin asked me to the prom last year, but I already had a date."

"And was he angry?"

"No, nothing like that. He just asked me, that's all. If I hadn't just sworn to tell the whole truth I never would've thought of it. It was nothing."

"Nothing," Shamika echoed, smiling. "Right. No more questions, Your Honor."

"Redirect," Carmichael said hastily. "Miss Carter, are you popular at school?"

"I don't know. I guess so."

"I'd certainly think so, too; you're very lovely. I'd also guess that

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Justin Hagen isn't the only boy you've turned down for a date. Isn't that so? A pretty girl like you must turn down boys quite often."

"I suppose so."

"Every day?"

"It seems like it sometimes," she sighed, bravely bearing up under the curse of youth and beauty.

"Thank you. No more questions."

"Miss Parker?"

"Just one more, Your Honor," Shamika said, rising. "Miss Carter, you said turning down Justin meant nothing to you. But you don't know what it meant to him, do you?"

"It was no big deal," the girl said, annoyed. "Like Mr. Carmichael said, it happens all the time."

"Right. Like Mr. Carmichael said. Thank you. No more questions."

"You may step down, miss."

The girl swept out, giving Justin a smile of encouragement as she passed.

"Any more witnesses, Mr. Carmichael?"

"No, sir, but I do have a few questions for a prosecution witness. Dr. Westbrook, the veterinarian?"

Shamika arched an eyebrow at me, then shrugged. I rose, took the chair beside Judge Jackmon's desk, and was sworn in by the deputy.

"Dr. Westbrook, I see by Mr. McKenna's report that you were the one who suggested searching the"—he glanced at his notes—"the Lachlan Machine Tool building. Why was that?"

"I didn't suggest *that* building, specifically. The dog had rust embedded in her paws and Mr. McKenna knew of some abandoned buildings in the area near where the first dog was found."

"So you didn't have the Lachlan building in mind when you went there?"

"No."

"But there are a number of buildings in that area. Why did you choose that one in particular?"

"We took the injured dog, Daisy Mae, with us. She became nervous and distressed near that building, so we took a look."

"Do I understand you correctly? Are you saying the dog told you where to search?"

"Not exactly. Dogs have a strong sense of location. I thought this dog would probably remember where she'd been mistreated, and she did."

"But she didn't actually tell you which building? By name, I mean?"

"Of course not."

"Are you an Animal Control officer, Doctor?"

"No. A paid consultant. Not unlike yourself."

"Touché," Carmichael grinned. "But you were accompanied by

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an Animal Control officer? Mr. McKenna, is that right?"

"Yes."

"And when the dog . . . indicated to you which building to search, did you break in?"

"No, a door was open."

"Very convenient." Carmichael nodded. "It was open, so you just walked in and searched it? Tell me, if you came to my house and the front door was open, would you walk in?"

"Certainly not, but it was an abandoned building, and—"

"Actually, it wasn't," Carmichael cut in smoothly, taking a sheaf of papers from a file on the table.

"Your Honor, I have an affidavit here from the law firm of Peterson and Welles, corporate counsel for Suncrest Enterprises, who hold current title to the former Lachlan Machine Tool Company. The affidavit states that neither Dr. Westbrook nor Mr. McKenna were authorized to conduct a search of their property or to enter it, and as no search warrant was requested or issued, I move to suppress all evidence gathered at that site as the result of the illegal search." He handed the affidavit to Jackmon, who frowned as he scanned it.

"Miss Parker?"

"No search warrant was required, Your Honor. Neither Dr. Westbrook nor Mr. McKenna are policemen."

"Then they're guilty of kidnapping," Carmichael shot back. "They seized my client against his will."

"That'll be enough, Mr. Carmichael," Jackmon said, waving him off. "It won't fly, Miss Parker. Even if Dr. Westbrook was only a volunteer, he was still acting in concert with a county employee performing the de facto duty of a policeman. This may be juvenile court but the Constitution still applies. The evidence found at the Lachlan Building is out."

"And since we've already demonstrated conclusively that my client had no motive whatever to injure the animals in question, I move that this case be dismissed for lack of evidence."

"Miss Parker?"

Shamika started to speak, thought better of it, and just shook her head.

"So ruled." Jackmon nodded somberly. "Case dismissed. With one caveat. The pictures of these maimed animals are . . . most disturbing. In the court's opinion, both Mr. McKenna and Dr. Westbrook were acting in good faith. I trust there will be no legal repercussions, Mr. Carmichael?"

"Not at this time, Your Honor," Carmichael said. "As far as we're concerned, justice has been served."

"Hey, wait a minute," I said, rising. "This is crazy."

"Doctor, I've already ruled," Jackmon said. "I'm sorry, but—"

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"Damn it, you saw the pictures of those dogs! And this kid was dragging another one in when—"

"Doctor, we're done! I've ruled!" Jackmon said sharply. "Miss Parker, would you please instruct your witness on the penalties for contempt of court!"

"Don't bother," I said, swallowing. "I know exactly what contempt of court means."

"We rolled the dice, we lost," Shamika said in the hallway outside the courtroom. "I knew the evidence you found could be a problem. In most juvy-court hearings we could have slid it in. Carmichael was—" She broke off as Justin Hagen left his father at the elevator and calmly strolled over to us.

"Hey, guys," he said cheerfully. "Just wanted to tell you no hard feelings. You screwed up, that's all. Could've happened to anybody."

"Look, you little—" Red began, but Shamika grabbed his wrist, cutting him off.

"Was there something you wanted, Mr. Hagen?" she asked. "If not—"

"Actually, there is something," he said, moving a little closer to Red. "I thought I recognized your voice that day at the factory. You're the Irish guy who does *The Death Row Pet Show* on TV, right? The one where you show the little animals all waiting to die?"

"That's right," Red said, not backing off an inch. "What of it?"

"Nothin', man, just love your show. Especially that snappy little executioner's ensemble you wear. Know where I could get one like it?"

"What you'd better get, sonny, is the hell away from me," McKenna said, flushing.

"Whoa, Red," I said, shouldering between them. "He wants you to hit him." The bailiff was already heading our way. "He's weird enough that he probably gets off on it."

Justin eyed me like something he'd found on his shoe. "I'd watch my mouth if I were you, Doctor. Calling someone crazy is slander and I've got a terrific lawyer. Or hadn't you noticed? You folks take care now, it's a dangerous world out there. Especially when you're none too bright." He sauntered off, entirely pleased with himself.

Red almost started after him but Shamika blocked his path. "Damn it, Red, Westbrook's right. Let him go."

Hearing her, Justin glanced back, flipped her the bird, then strolled on to join his father and Wes Carmichael at the elevator.

"Bastard!" Red muttered.

"No," I said. "Raptor."

"What?" They were both looking at me oddly.

"Raptor. When I was a grad student at State, somebody brought in a peregrine falcon with a broken wing. I splinted it, fed that

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bird every day until she healed. And the morning I released her, she gave me this." I held up my left hand, showing them the jagged scar on my palm.

"She bit you?" Red asked.

"To the bone. Almost severed a tendon."

"But if you'd been caring for her—" Shamika began.

"That didn't count with her. She was a raptor, a wild bird of prey. Their brains don't work like ours. Their world divides neatly into two categories, food and other stuff. She was hungry, wondered if I was edible, so she bit me to find out. Beyond that, I didn't matter and the fact that I'd helped her didn't matter. I was warm meat to her, nothing more. Know what? Justin's got eyes like that. Raptor's eyes."

"Psycho's eyes, more likely," McKenna snorted.

"No, that's the really scary part. I don't think he's crazy in the conventional sense. He's obviously very bright and he can function just fine in society: no arrests, no enemies. But down deep he's a raptor. Or worse. People don't mean any more to him than animals. And we already know how he treats them. I don't think we've seen the last of him."

"You have for now," Shamika said firmly. "After that little outburst in court, the judge would cite you in a heartbeat if he thinks you're harassing him."

"Harassing him?" I said, surprised. "Are you kidding? I want to stay as far away from Justin Hagen as I can."

"It won't be that easy," Red mused. "We grabbed the kid and hauled him into court. Your raptor bit you for no reason at all. But suppose you'd ticked her off? What do you think she would have done to you then?"

Red was right. And so I took precautions. I double-checked the locks on my clinic every night and scanned the parking lot before I walked out. At home, I left the yard lights on all night and even stashed a Louisville Slugger behind the front door.

My wife tolerated my paranoia with her typical good humor. Yvonne took care to lock house doors and car doors, especially when she was home alone. She did so because I asked her to, not because she thought there was any real danger.

But she hadn't seen Justin Hagen's eyes.

And in the end, our penny-ante precautions didn't matter anyway.

Ten days after the trial, I was grabbing a quick lunch with Yvonne at home. The countertop TV was on, but neither of us was paying it much attention until they mentioned an explosion—a car bomb had gone off at Saginaw State College. They cut to the scene of the incident, a college parking lot, dazed kids being ques-

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tioned by police, yellow tapes cordoning off the site of the blast. And I felt the hair rise on the back of my neck.

The wrecked vehicle was a van. An ordinary white delivery truck. Very familiar. The sign on the door said Quad-County Animal Control. And somehow I knew what had happened even before I called the hospital.

He looked like death itself. Against the stark white hospital sheets, Red McKenna looked like his own grandfather, his fiery hair burned back from his forehead, face shiny with salve. The freckles looked like age spots. His arms and hands were wrapped in oily gauze. God, he looked so small. I hadn't realized how thin—His eyes blinked open, instantly homing in on me like radar.

"You look like hell," I said.

"Thank you. You look a little green yourself."

"Maybe it's your Irish charm. What happened?"

"Climbed into my truck, turned the key, *boom!* Woke up here. Hurtin'. A lot."

"How bad's the damage?"

"I won't be chasin' any runaway hounds for a while. First- and second-degree burns on my arms and legs. The bomb triggered the airbag or I'd have been burned worse. Maybe killed. Cops say I was lucky."

"If you're lucky, I'd hate to meet somebody who wasn't. Any idea who might have done it?"

"Don't be a jackass, David. We both know who did it."

"Justin Hagen?"

"Damn straight. Justin freakin' Hagen."

"Did you tell the police?"

"The second I woke up. Know where the lad was while I was gettin' bombed? At an Honor Society luncheon. Perfect alibi."

"What about the bomb? Can the police tell anything from it?"

"Not much. It was a pipe bomb, nothing special about it. They tell me you can find plans for 'em on the Internet. Anyone with half a brain can make one. It'd be child's play for a whiz like Justin."

"You can't be sure of that. What about that dogfighting case you're involved in? The one with the drug dealer? Garces?"

"I'm no problem for Kiki Garces. The IRS is auditing his books, the FBI's got wiretap evidence on him, and the DEA seized his house under the RICO law. The sport-fighting charge is strictly small-change. If he wanted to whack out a witness I'd be twentieth on his list. No, the bomb was young Justin's handiwork. Hell, he even told me he was going to do it."

"What are you talking about?"

"Remember what he said in the hall after the hearing? About how much he liked *The Death Row Pet Show?*"

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"I remember. So?"

"So that's why I was at the college. We tape the show there, in the school's audio-visual department. He must have known that. At the animal shelter, a kid messing with a truck would stand out like a sore thumb, but in a crowded college parking lot? Nobody paid any attention to him."

"You mean people saw him there?"

"No," Red said bitterly. "They saw me. Or thought they did. A couple of kids noticed a guy in an executioner's outfit working on the van. And Justin asked about my outfit that day, remember?"

"Yeah, I do. Sweet Jesus."

"That sums it up nicely. Makes you feel like the proverbial one-legged fella in a butt-kickin' contest, don't it?"

"I don't understand," I said slowly. "How could he be at an honors banquet and at the college too?"

"Maybe he wasn't. Maybe the kids were wrong about seeing someone near the van. Or the bomb was on a timer or—hell, I don't know. The only thing I'm sure of is that I've got to get out of this place. I'm racked up, damned near helpless. I half expect Justin Hagen to walk through that door any minute and the worst I could do is make a face at him."

"It might work. You look pretty scary."

"I feel more scared than scary. Scared spitless. I don't believe I've ever had a real enemy in my life, to say nothing of one capable of smashing me up like this." He sagged back on his pillow. "Would you consider doin' me a favor, David?"

"Sure."

"After what happened, I'm a bit leery of drivin'. Can you give me a lift home?"

"Of course. Glad to."

"Thanks, but there's just a bit more to it. My doctor says he won't cut me loose unless I arrange for outpatient medical care. I told him I had a friend who could handle it. You."

"Are you nuts? I'm a veterinarian."

"C'mon, I've been around dogs so long I must be part hound by now. I don't need a damned heart transplant, all you'll have to do is change my dressings once a day. Even a dog doctor can manage that, right?"

"What the hell, if I botch it I'll just put you to sleep. When do you want to leave?"

"Would right now be too soon?"

I waited for Red at the emergency-room entrance. They brought him out in a wheelchair, still wearing a bathrobe. He assured me the chair was strictly hospital policy but with his arms and legs swathed in bandages, he looked like he needed it. Still, he climbed into the

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Jeep on his own, wincing against the pain but not complaining.

I followed his directions to an older, working-class neighborhood off Remington, single-family houses, postage-stamp lawns. Red's place was a two-bedroom ranch surrounded by a chain-link fence. I pulled into the driveway and stopped. But he made no move to get out.

"Is something wrong?"

"Yeah," he said, swallowing. "My dogs. Strange car in the driveway, they should be making a fuss. They're not."

"Stay here," I said, climbing out. "I'll check."

"I'll go with you," he said, unsnapping his safety belt.

"You wait here, McKenna!" I snapped. "Or I'll take you straight back to the hospital, swear to God!"

"Okay, okay," he said grudgingly. "The kennels are around back."

Vaulting the fence, I trotted around the house. And stopped. No rush. The three dogs were sprawled in postures that left no doubt about their condition. I've seen death often enough to recognize it, even at a distance. Still, I had to be sure. A border collie, a spitz, and a Newfoundland pup. Each had been shot in the head, probably from the fence. And probably with the same .22-pellet pistol that had been used on the first two dogs that had been tortured.

Bloated flies were crawling over their eyes and mouths and their carcasses were already beginning to swell. Damn it to hell!

McKenna read it in my face as I stalked back to the Jeep. His unspoken question died in his eyes. I shook my head.

He swallowed hard, looking down helplessly at his bandaged hands. "Was it . . . quick? Or not?" he asked quietly.

"Quick," I said. "Executed, like the first two. Do you want me to bury them?"

"No, I'll have somebody from the shelter pick them up. They were just strays. Leftovers from *The Death Row Pet Show*. I, um, God. I'm gonna kill that kid, David."

"Maybe. But not today. We'll collect some clothes, then you're coming home with me to heal up. And we'll figure this thing out together. Okay?"

"Yeah," he said, taking a ragged breath. "Okay."

Yvonne and I haven't been married long, but she's already gotten used to the idea that I occasionally bring injured strays home with me. Red McKenna was just one more.

So she treated him like a dog. Which, at our house, happens to be pretty darned good. He had his own room, munchies whenever he got hungry, and a lot of TLC. A dog's life. At the Westbrooks'.

Under ordinary circumstances, it would have been a fun visit for all of us. With his dry wit and natural courtesy, Red was a perfect lodger. But these weren't ordinary circumstances.

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He slept through most of the first day, but on the second, though his healing burns caused him a lot of discomfort, he refused to take anything stronger than aspirin. He said he needed the pain to keep his head clear. Maybe he was right.

I woke that night, sitting up suddenly, listening for . . . I had no idea what. Something. Easing silently out of bed, I prowled the house, checking the locks and windows.

"They're okay," Red said softly from the living room. "I checked 'em five minutes ago." He was sitting in an easy chair with a view of the street.

"Is anything wrong?"

"Everything's wrong. I can't stay here."

"Why not?" I slumped down in a chair opposite his.

"I may bring my trouble onto you."

"Don't be an idiot. That psycho's got as much reason to hate me as you. The only question is whether he wants to finish the job on you or take a run at me. Either way, we're better off together. At least we can watch each other's backs. I've been doing some thinking. Are you awake enough for a council of war?"

"Awake? I may never sleep again. What's on your mind?"

"At the courthouse, you said Justin was a prodigy at evil? I think you were dead right."

"I was almost dead, period."

"That was partly my fault. He's only sixteen, his savagery had been directed at helpless animals, so I wrote him off as a wacko, a little punk. I never dreamed how dangerous he really was."

"Neither did anyone else. His family, his attorney, hell, even Judge Jackmon thought the whole thing was just a misunderstanding. And I can't fault 'em for it. He's a bright, polite, clean-cut kid who gets his jollies by inflicting pain."

"And death," I added. "I wish they could have seen his eyes in the hallway when he told you how much he liked *The Death Row Pet Show* and the executioner's outfit."

"I wish I'd paid more attention myself. The question is, what can we do about it?"

"For openers, we have to be irregular. He was able to nail you and set up an alibi for himself because he knew exactly where you'd be and when. So for now, you can't go back to work or do anything you'd normally do. Okay?"

"I can't hide here forever."

"You won't. If you're not available, I think he'll come after me. I'm an easy target—I keep regular office hours, live out in the country. I'll look like a sitting duck."

"Look, hell, you'll *be* a sitting duck."

"Not quite. We underestimated him before, we won't again. And we have another thing working for us. He doesn't want to get caught."

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"He's managed that part just fine so far."

"It won't be as easy with me. He can't use a bomb or anything dramatic. The link between us would be so obvious it'd lead the law directly to him. He'll have to be more subtle. My guess is, I'll probably have an accident. A bad one."

"How do you figure that?"

"There's been a twisted logic to his actions so far. Each target has been a little bigger: Nowicki the nerd, then the cheerleader, then a teacher. Then you. And each incident's been more . . . refined."

"A car bomb? That's your idea of *refined?*"

"It was a good enough bomb to give him a perfect alibi. He's getting better at this."

"Maybe we only think he is. What if Nowicki's dog wasn't Justin's first crime, just the first we found? He had a sister who disappeared a couple of years ago, remember?"

"The police would have investigated that at the time. If he'd been guilty—"

"They're investigating my car bombing but I don't see 'em hauling our young hero away in cuffs. We could still be underestimating him. Suppose we only caught him because he's so crazy he doesn't care?"

"It won't take us long to find out."

"Why not?"

"Evil genius or a stone psycho, he's still only sixteen. Have you ever known a patient teenager?"

"No," Red admitted, with a trace of a smile. "Not a one."

Odd. I've always considered my life quiet. I love my work, love the animals. Healing them, or not, can be very intense business. To me at least. But I'd never thought of it as dangerous.

I did now.

One problem solved itself. My wife's sister was eight and a half months pregnant and my wife had planned to help out in the final weeks. The timing couldn't have been better. Yvonne left on schedule, leaving Red and me on our own.

Changing his dressings wasn't difficult, but it was tricky. Skin sloughed off with the bandages, and sometimes I had to debride dead tissue from the wounds to prevent infection. It was painful for Red. And a grim reminder for me.

His injuries were no accident. This had been done to him deliberately. By someone who hated us both. And so we were very, very careful. Checking and double-checking the locks every night became automatic. Often as not, I woke in the night and checked them again. I left binoculars beside the living room window to scope out passing cars and slept with a baseball bat beside my bed.

We checked under the hoods of both cars every morning to be sure they hadn't been tampered with, then I drove to the clinic on

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schedule. Taking a roundabout route in my wife's car, Red would arrive later to take up an observation post from a private driveway down the street.

For now, my clinic is housed in a storefront building on the outskirts of Algoma, a northern Michigan bedroom community for Saginaw, Bay City, and Midland to the south. It's a quiet neighborhood, not much street traffic, which I hoped would make Justin stand out when he showed up.

My practice is commonplace: sick and injured housepets (cats, dogs, and birds) plus a few exotics (iguanas or potbellied pigs). I hope to have a full-service facility someday, with room to treat large animals, horses and cattle.

If I live that long.

For the first time in my life, I considered my own death objectively. Trying to imagine how it might be arranged. A sobering experience. Not one I recommend. Aside from getting nipped by hounds, clawed by cats, or having your toes tromped by a cow, a veterinary practice is relatively safe work. In planning my own assassination, I decided I'd be in the most danger on the road, jogging or driving; perhaps I'd be the victim of a hit and run.

Wrong. It was simpler than that. And a lot rougher.

The alarm system for the office is mounted just inside the back door, so I enter and leave that way. No danger, a six-step flight of stairs down to an open-ended alley that runs the width of the block. Quick, simple, and safe.

Closing time, the fourth day of the siege, I stepped out, checked the alley, and turned to lock the alarm box. I was holding a client's declawed Siamese kitten, eight months old, that I meant to drop off on my way home. She was squirming, so I put her down a moment. She started down the stairs ahead of me. And saved my life.

With her paws bandaged, the Siamese moved carefully down the unfamiliar steps, one at a time, but on the third step, her tail bumped something unexpected, and she gave a *yowr* of surprise, glancing backward.

I didn't see what had startled her at first. I wasn't supposed to. A wire. So fine it was barely visible, a black tripwire was stretched tautly across the stairway, from the wall to the railing, about fourteen inches high.

The cat had passed beneath it. It would have caught me at mid shin. Tripping me? Or triggering something? No, I could see both ends of the wire, wrapped around the railing balusters. It wasn't connected to anything. It was only there to make me fall.

Down a few steps? At worst I'd collect some bruises or a bloody nose. There had to be more.

I quickly scanned the alley again. Was Justin lurking nearby to finish the job? If so, there was only one place he could be. In the

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shadow of a basement doorway just beyond the foot of the stairs.

No time for finesse! With a shout of surprise, I stomped heavily on the metal steps, making an ungodly racket I hoped would pass for a fall. Then I vaulted the rail and sprinted for the doorway as he came lunging out with a baseball bat.

I tackled him full-steam ahead, slamming him back into the wall, hammering him with body shots as we went down.

Wrenching the bat out of his hands, I hauled him to his feet. And it was only then that I realized the kid who'd jumped me wasn't Justin Hagen at all. It was the owner of the first dog, the special ed student, Chester Nowicki.

"What do we do with him?" I asked. We were standing outside my Jeep. Chester was in the back, his wrists lashed behind him with the vinyl ties dogcatchers use to subdue animals.

"We need some answers," Red said, brooding. "So far, all he's told us is to screw ourselves, that Justin will make us eat dirt again. Know what? He may be right. If we take him to the police, it'll be our word against his. You'll be lucky if you're not charged with assault on a minor."

"But he's the one who jumped me! You saw it!"

"But no one else did. He'll say you jumped him and we're in cahoots. Any competent attorney would win him a walk and Wes Carmichael is one of the best in the state."

"The Hagens' lawyer?"

"He'll wind up defending this kid, sure as God made coyotes. Don't you see? Justin snookered us again. He sent this dimbulb after you. If he whacks you, fine. And if something goes wrong and he gets caught, Chester here takes the fall alone, maybe for all of it. Justin's free as the breeze."

"Do you think Chester was in on this from the beginning?"

"The first dog we found was his. He must have gone along with it."

"Maybe he was afraid not to."

Red glanced at me oddly. "You're right," he said. "And after what he's seen, he's probably a helluva lot more afraid of Justin than he is of us or even the police. But maybe we can change that."

"How do you mean?"

"Justin likes *The Death Row Pet Show*. Let's see how much Chester likes it. The real thing, I mean."

Closed for the night, the looming brick walls of the Quad-County Animal Shelter looked as forbidding as a medieval prison. We pulled in and parked behind the building.

"Give me five minutes," Red whispered, "then bring young Chester into the secure area."

"Where the fighting dogs are kept? What for?"

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"Just do it," Red hissed.

"What do you guys think you're doing?" Nowicki asked as Red climbed painfully out. "We'll sue your asses. You got no right to—"

"Shut up!" I snapped. I was even more uneasy than Nowicki. There was a pitiless rage in Red's eyes that I'd never seen before.

But I did as he asked. Five minutes later I helped Chester out of the Jeep and led him through the side door of the shelter. Even in the corridor we could hear the racket from within, dogs savagely barking and snarling.

Chester eyed the warning signs at the secure area with growing nervousness as we approached. And when I opened the door and the howling din rolled over us like a wave of fury, he bolted!

Elbowing me in the ribs, he broke free, but he only managed a few steps before I caught him, spun him around, and thrust him through the doorway.

Into hell.

The caged fighting dogs had gone berserk, frothing at the mouth, hurling themselves madly at the bars, raising a thunderous tumult. The rage of an entire race.

And at the far end of the room, Red waited, in full regalia. He'd not only donned his executioner's mask, he'd stripped off his shirt and bandages. His raw, seeping lesions gave him the look of a demon from Hades. With his own feral army.

Chester froze. McKenna was standing at the exam table holding Daisy Mae, the scarred Labrador. On TV, Red played this scene for irony, but it looked all too real here. The masked executioner with the weeping wounds and the maimed dog in his arms was the most terrifying sight I'd ever seen. And the fury of the fighting dogs only underscored the madness.

"Come closer, boy," Red intoned. "Welcome to *The Death Row Pet Show*. Remember this lady? She remembers you, Chester. She's been telling her friends in the cages about you. About what you and Justin did to her. And did to the others."

"You're crazy," Chester stammered, looking wildly around. "Dogs can't talk!"

"Is that why you tortured them? Because Justin told you they couldn't talk? He was wrong. They can. But only to each other. Listen to them. They're talking now! LISTEN TO THEM!"

At his roar, the clamor from the cages grew even louder. Red stalked slowly toward us, carrying the Lab. Chester shrank back, drooling, moaning in terror.

"Will you tell us what you did, boy?" Red said quietly. "Or shall I turn these others loose, and have you tell it to them?"

"You have nothing," Gerald Hagen said coldly. "Less than nothing. The confession was given under duress by a boy so terrified he'd

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say anything. These two"—he aimed a manicured forefinger at Red and me— "are trying to blame my son for everything that's gone wrong in their miserable lives."

"Calm down, Gerald," Judge Jackmon interjected quietly. "I know the Nowicki boy's confession is problematic. That's why we're meeting in my chambers instead of a police station." Jackmon was in shirtsleeves, seated at his desk. His robe hung on a coat tree beside his office door. A small room, utilitarian furniture, tiled floor. Not so much as a picture on the wall.

Gerald and Justin Hagen looked like they'd been called in off the golf course—matching blue polo shirts, slacks, saddle shoes. Hagen senior's beefy face was flushed from the sun. And anger. Justin was the opposite, remarkably cool, mildly amused.

"We have an—unusual situation here," Jackmon continued. "At Justin's show-cause hearing I excluded evidence from the abandoned factory that we both know I could have admitted. There was an element of doubt and I gave you the benefit of that doubt. That's not possible this time, Gerald. There's no doubt about the Nowicki boy's confession. It's . . ." He removed his glasses and massaged his eyes. "It's the most appalling thing I've heard in twenty years on the bench."

"But Justin barely knows the boy! He had nothing to do with any of this—madness."

"Gerald, the Nowicki boy's IQ is seventy-one, and he's socially dysfunctional. He's known your son since grade school, practically worships him. But in any case, I'm not relying on his word alone. There's more. Let me finish, please." He waved off Hagen's protests.

"When I excluded the evidence from the factory that Dr. Westbrook and Mr. McKenna found, it had the effect of shielding the site from any further search. That was a mistake. The state police have been there all night conducting a valid search with the owner's permission. You see, the room the doctor and Mr. McKenna found wasn't the only one the boys used. There was another room, in the basement. With the remains of other animals, several half-built pipe bombs . . . and the remains of two children as well."

"But Justin—"

"Gerald, the police also found videotapes! I'm sorry. There's no easy way to tell you this. The boys filmed every godawful thing they did. And the police have already tentatively identified one of the children on the tapes as your daughter."

Hagen stared at Jackmon, his eyes pleading, willing him to retract it all. Then he turned to his son. "Justin?"

Odd. In that moment I realized I'd been wrong about Justin's eyes. He was no raptor. Raptors are warm-blooded. And they never kill for sport. Justin's expression showed no hint of human

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warmth. It was reptilian. A lizard's unblinking stare. Or a snake's.

"You'd better get Wes Carmichael down here," Justin said at last. "As a corporate attorney, kidnapping and murder are a bit out of your league. Aren't they, Pop?"

Their gazes locked for what seemed a very long time. Gerald looked away first, then slumped in his chair, aged by half a century in the past few moments.

But he didn't argue. Perhaps on some level, he'd always known.

"What do you want from me, Judge?" Hagen asked at last.

"Your consent and cooperation," Jackmon said. "A trial won't accomplish anything."

"What? Are you serious?" I said, sitting bolt upright in my chair.

"Sit down, Doctor, and shut up," Jackmon said coldly. "You and McKenna are here only as a courtesy. Don't abuse it. Since both boys are juveniles, under Michigan law they'd become free automatically at age twenty-one, no matter what the crime. And that's not appropriate here, is it, Gerald?"

Hagen shook his head.

"In my judgment, the best course is for you to commit Justin to a state hospital for the insane under court supervision. Indefinitely. Prison's no place for him, but I don't believe either of the boys should ever be free again. And I can see to it that they're not."

"Now wait just a minute," Justin began.

"Be quiet, son, or I'll have you removed," Jackmon snapped. "Gerald?"

"Life, Judge?" Hagen pleaded, "I can't—"

"My only alternative would be to waive jurisdiction. Kidnapping's a federal offense. Tried as adults, they'd face the death penalty. And any jury that sees those tapes . . ."

"No," Hagen said hoarsely. "You're right, of course. God. What am I going to do?"

"Go home, Mr. Hagen," Jackmon said with surprising gentleness. "Your wife needs you now. We'll settle the details later. Go home. But Justin will remain here in custody. Permanently."

Go home. It was good advice. Naturally we didn't take it. McKenna and I stalked glumly out of the courthouse and crossed the street to The Final Verdict, the nearest bar.

Taking stools at the end of the counter away from the other customers, we both ordered bourbon, straight up. Red knocked his back with a single gulp and ordered another. I sipped mine more slowly, liquid smoke trickling down my throat, drowning my anger. Neither of us spoke for a while.

"I suppose a mental hospital forever is better than juvy jail for a few years," I said at last.

"It's definitely better for me," Red nodded grimly. "Because if

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they ever cut those two loose they'll find me waitin' for 'em at the gate with a damned shotgun. They were never boys at all, they're stone psychos who aren't very tall. Yet."

"Under the law, Jackmon made the best deal he could."

"I know he did," Red said, "that's not what's bugging me."

"What then?"

"Kiki Garces."

"The guy who owns the fighting dogs? What about him?"

"He cut a deal with the feds today, five years in minimum security in exchange for a guilty plea."

"So the state saves the cost of a trial and . . ." My voice trailed off as I realized the implications. "The dogs?"

"Won't be needed for evidence anymore," he said grimly. "They'll all be euthanized. By court order."

"Can't anything—?"

"Not a chance," he snapped. "The court's right. You saw them. All I did was take one pit bull out of his cage and show him to the others and the lot of them went berserk. They're trained, blooded killers and there's no untraining them now. They have to be destroyed."

"But damn it, they helped solve a double homicide and got a heavyweight drug dealer off the street! And they're the ones who end up on death row? It's so . . . unjust."

"What does human justice have to do with dogs?" Red said bitterly.

I thought it was a rhetorical question, but a moment later he answered it. Sort of.

"Egyptian hell," McKenna said.

"What?"

"Didn't the old Egyptians worship some kind of a dog god?"

I thought a moment. "A jackal, actually, a wild dog. Body of a man, face of a jackal. Anubis. I think he was the guardian of the tombs."

"Anubis." He savored the name, rolling it around on his tongue. "Now that would be real justice."

"What would?"

"Just suppose that when Kiki Garces and Justin Hagen and Nowicki and all the other soulless bastards who abuse animals arrive in hell, they don't meet the devil. They meet . . ."

"Anubis," I finished.

"Right, Anubis. Dogs don't get much justice in this world, maybe they get it in the next. I like it. Hell. With a mean dog in charge."

"It's only a myth."

"Maybe," he conceded. "But it sure works for me."

"Yeah," I said. "Me too."

But it didn't. Not really.

As much as I liked the idea of a vengeful dog god waiting to mete out justice for animals in the next world, in my heart I

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didn't really buy it. For good or ill, I'm not a very religious person, so Egyptian myths rate fairly low on the list of things I believe in. Which left me with a problem.

A debt.

Mistreated from birth, twisted by greedy men into killing machines, the death-row dogs had still done us a great service.

Perhaps even saved our lives. And I couldn't write off that obligation just by wishing them better luck in the next world.

I woke early the next morning after a restless night, irritable, haunted by dreams of an angry jackal god. Enough! Poring over the phone book as I gulped my coffee, I made a list. A long one.

Throughout the day at the clinic, I spent every spare minute between patients making phone calls. It took me until three that afternoon to finish the list. Of my twenty-seven possibilities, I scored four potential hits.

Four. It still wasn't fair, but it was better than nothing. And so I called Red McKenna. And explained. "David, I'm sorry. I just can't do it. I've already gotten a court order to destroy Garces's dogs."

"So? The shelter euthanizes a couple of hundred animals a month. How will the court know if you miss a few? Do you furnish a list of names afterward?"

"Of course not, we don't even know their names. That's not the point."

"You're damned right it's not! Justice is the point! These dogs helped us take a human monster off the street, McKenna. We owe them a debt of honor. Or didn't they teach you about honor on that farm where you grew up?"

"By God, Westbrook, you've got a razor for a tongue," Red said softly. "Are you sure your mother wasn't Irish?"

"Scottish, actually."

"Close enough," he sighed. "All right. What do you want me to do?"

Our first stop was a small business on the east side of Saginaw. The sign above the door read RIPLEY AUTO SALVAGE. Red frowned as he climbed out of the animal-control van, eyeing the ten-foot metal fence that circled a vast area behind a concrete-block warehouse.

The owner sauntered out to meet us. A big man in faded coveralls, Jack Ripley probably topped three hundred pounds. His hands were greasy and he needed a shave, but I'd been told he was honest. I hoped it was true. I made the introductions.

"I take it your business is a kind of junkyard, Mr. Ripley?" Red said doubtfully.

"We call it vehicle recycling nowadays," Ripley said, unoffended. "Late-model wrecks are worth more for parts than the cars cost new. I've got three thousand units on two hundred fenced acres.

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Book value on 'em is half a million. Wrecks they may be, but junk they definitely ain't." Turning away, Ripley spat a brown stream of tobacco juice in the dust. "I'm usually pretty good with faces, McKenna. Don't I know you from someplace?"

"Maybe from television?" I offered. "Red does a program—"

"The Death Row Pet Show." Ripley snapped his grimy fingers, nodding. "That's it. The wife adopted a poodle off your program a few months ago. So what's up, Dr. Westbrook? When you called you said you might have a guard dog for me. Do you guys peddle pups door-to-door now?"

"Not exactly," Red said. "This is a special situation. Here, see for yourself." He swung the back door of the van open, revealing a steel cage.

Behind the bars, a huge black death-row Rottweiler slowly rose to his full height, looking us over.

He didn't growl. He didn't have to.

"Whoa," Ripley said, awed. "Big one, isn't he? What's he weigh?"

"About one-sixty," Red said, "and he's extremely aggressive. This dog will guard your property with his life, Mr. Ripley, but he's as dangerous as a loaded gun. Even if he becomes friendly with you over time, you'll *never* be able to trust him around strangers, especially kids. Nor around other dogs. Do you understand?"

Ripley nodded soberly. "I've had guard dogs before. Not one like this, though. How'd he get them scars on his face?"

"Fighting," Red said. "He's been blooded in the ring."

"Dogfighting." Ripley spat. "Never could understand the sorry-ass scum who—well, it don't matter now. After what he's been through, my place will seem like a rest home. Warm bed, plenty o' grub, and two hundred acres to run in. How's that sound, fella?"

The outlaw Rottweiler eyed Ripley with an unblinking stare. Sizing him up.

"Not real friendly, is he? What's his name?"

"We don't actually—"

"Anubis," I interrupted. "We call him Anubis."

"Anubis?" Ripley frowned. "What the hell kinda name is that?"

"Egyptian," Red said drily, shaking his head.

"No kidding? Egyptian? Now ain't that something?" Ripley moved closer to the bars, warily offering his hand for the dog to sniff. "So what do you think? Are you and me gonna get along, Anubis?"

And I swear at the sound of his name, the Rott's ears perked up. Just for a moment.

Perhaps he was only responding to the warmth in Ripley's voice. But I prefer to think he'd heard the jackal god's name before. Somewhere.

Dogs' racial memories are deeper and more ancient than ours. Who knows? Maybe they have a few legends of their own. ●

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An Old School Friend

by Robin Hathaway

"It started about three months ago." Alice was telling Emily over lunch about the hate mail she had been receiving. "Since then I've been getting a letter every week."

"How awful. What do they say?"

"The first said, 'Remember me? You ruined my life.'" She broke a stalk of celery with a snap.

"And you haven't a clue who it could be?"

Alice shook her head impatiently. "But I think it's someone from school."

"Well, that's a start. What makes you think that?"

"The second letter said, 'The boys loved you and ignored me.' Doesn't that sound like someone from high school?"

Emily nodded. She also noted that these letters must have made a strong impression on Alice, if she had committed them to memory.

"The third letter said, 'You'll pay for that horrid episode.'"

Emily's eyes widened. "That's a threat, Alice. You should tell the police."

Alice bit her lip. "I'd rather not. I don't want any publicity."

Emily understood. If an ordinary citizen reported such an incident, it would never make the news. But Alice was a prominent actress; if she forgot her eye shadow it made the news.

"Can you think of anyone who might have a grudge against you?"

"Damn it, Emily, I don't remember any of those people . . . except you, of course. It's been over twenty years, for God's sake. I can't even remember their names. And I never went to any of those stupid reunions. You're the only one I've kept up with."

Emily smiled ruefully. Three husbands and a successful career on the stage had left Alice little time for keeping up with old school friends. It was Emily who had done the keeping up—call-

In her 1997 debut novel *The Doctor Digs a Grave*, Robin Hathaway introduced cardiologist and part-time sleuth Dr. Andrew Fenimore. The book won the St. Martin's /Malice Domestic prize for best first traditional mystery, and later the Agatha Award and a Macavity nomination. Look for the new Fenimore case, *The Doctor Makes a Dollhouse Call.* ¶

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ing at regular intervals, hoping to catch a few minutes' chat with her friend, and once in a blue moon actually kidnapping her for lunch. Today was one of those blue moons.

"Maybe, if we work together, we can track her down." Emily attacked her shrimp salad.

As Alice sampled her Caesar salad, she tried to remember exactly when Emily had reentered her life. One day, a few years ago, Emily had separated herself from the herd of starry-eyed fans at the stage door with the words, "Remember me, Alice? Emily—from Bannerwell?" Actually, it was "Bannerwell," not Emily, that had caught Alice's attention. Bannerwell was her old school. She hadn't thought of it for years. She had drawn Emily back into the theater, into her dressing room, and they had a nice chat about school days. And, miraculously, Emily hadn't overstayed. She had sensed the exact moment when Alice had begun to grow bored and excused herself.

It was several months before Emily had showed up again. This time it was after a matinée. She had asked Alice to have dinner with her. Of course, Alice never went out after a performance; she was too depleted. But, not wanting to appear ungracious, she had agreed to have lunch with her the next day—before rehearsal. As the time neared for their date, Alice grew annoyed with herself. Why had she agreed to this? What had she been thinking of? Her time was precious. There were so many more important things demanding her attention—press interviews, scripts to be read, producers to charm. But, oddly enough, she had had a good time. Emily had a clever, irreverent way of talking which made Alice laugh. And it was relaxing to be with someone who didn't matter. Someone she didn't have to be careful of, impress, or be *up* for. She could say absolutely anything to Emily and it didn't matter. Gradually, Alice began to depend on these lunches with Emily. She actually looked forward to them. Not too often, of course. Once every two or three months. And Emily never pushed it. By the time she called, Alice was always more than ready to see her. Especially—today.

"Are these notes handwritten?" Emily asked.

"Yes. Hand-printed in block letters on cheap white paper. And they come in standard white envelopes."

While the waiter served the desserts (Emily's dessert. Alice was weight-watching.), Emily was thoughtful. As soon as the waiter was gone, she said to Alice, "Do you still have your yearbook?"

"Oh, lord, Em. If I do, I wouldn't begin to know where it is."

Emily had visions of trunks and packing boxes crammed with designer clothes, custom-made shoes and expensive accessories which had been dragged from city to city when Alice Anders (the adaptation of her real name—Anderson) was on tour—even to London once for a short run in a Noel Coward production. Short, because the London audience had hooted at her British accent.

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But they had loved her in New York.

"Never mind. I have mine. Why don't we run over to my place and take a look at it?"

Alice glanced at her watch. "I have a hairdresser appointment at three—"

"If I skip this," Emily gestured at her untouched slice of key-lime pie, "we'll have plenty of time." Emily signaled the waiter for the check.

Emily's apartment was only a few blocks from the restaurant—an efficiency on East 33rd Street. She shared it with Otis, an overweight tomcat who ignored the intrusion of Alice completely (a rare experience for Alice). He continued to bathe himself on the windowsill. There were more books than furniture in the apartment. Books lined shelves on three walls and piles of them spilled onto the floor, around the sofa bed and single armchair. When they came in, Emily went straight to a shelf and took out the yearbook. Alice recognized the green leather cover embossed with gold letters immediately. Emily opened it to the class picture and laid it on top of some more books which were strewn on the coffee table.

"God, Emily, don't you do anything but read?" Alice had to move some books to make room to sit down on the futon. Ignoring the yearbook, she looked at the volume in her hand. *The Psychology of the Five Senses* by Otto Rheinhardt, Ph.D. "Still into psych, I see. What a lot of balderdash."

Emily smiled indulgently at her friend's affectation—the use of antiquated British expressions like "balderdash." "Not really. As an actress you use psychology every day to understand the characters you play, don't you?"

Alice yawned and settled into the sofa. "Well, if I do, I do it unconsciously."

"Exactly—that's what psych is all about—the unconscious."

"Touché." Alice drew the yearbook onto her lap and stared at the picture. "Oh my God."

"What's the matter?"

"Look at me. I'm so young—and innocent."

"Umm." Emily tried to keep the sarcasm out of her voice, but memories of Alice's escapades in the backseats of cars and the guest bedrooms of the homes of their classmates were too vivid.

Alice picked up on her tone. "Well, wasn't I?" And her question *was* innocent.

"Of course, dear." She patted her arm and pointed to her own picture. Owl-like in a pair of oversized spectacles, Emily wore a mischievous grin.

"What was so funny?"

Emily laughed. "Don't you remember? The photographer

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kept scratching his crotch."

Alice laughed, too. "I'd forgotten that."

"Surely you remember her?" Emily pointed to a statuesque blonde in the back row.

"Venus on the Half Shell."

"Right. She went steady with Hercules." Emily pointed to a huge muscular boy at the other end of the same row.

"Oh, Herk. He was after me for a while, but I was never drawn to brawn."

Emily restrained a smile, remembering that Alice had dated every member of the football team from front line to back. "I know. Let's pop over to the school and take a look around. Maybe that will bring back this 'horrid episode,' whatever it was."

"Oh, I can't. I have that hair—"

"Cancel it. Your hair looks great. This is more important. You don't want to spend the rest of your life dreading to pick up your mail, do you?"

Alice felt the prickly fear at the back of her scalp that she always felt when the maid brought the mail in on her breakfast tray and that queasy feeling that followed as she riffled through the pile, praying there would be no envelope bearing hand-printed block letters. "Oh, all right," she said, making up her mind.

"The phone's right over there." Emily pointed to an old dial phone teetering on the top of yet another pile of books.

Bannerwell School was ten blocks downtown. They decided to take a cab. Emily waved from the curb and the cabs whisked by her as if she were invisible. Alice strode out into the street and buttonholed the first one that came her way. Inside the cab, Alice said, "But it's August. Won't the school be closed?"

"If it is, I know an easy way in—through the girls' cloakroom. Remember? That door never locked properly. We used to escape through it for a quick smoke during study hall."

"How do you remember these things, Em? I don't remember anything."

"We remember what we want to. You remember your lines, don't you?"

"Oh—but that's different. I forget them as soon as the run's over."

The cabby pulled up to the curb. Alice looked out the window at the collection of gray Gothic buildings, so incongruous among its steel and glass neighbors. The focal point of the gray pile was a church—a fair imitation of an English cathedral. The two women squirmed out of the cab and onto the hot pavement.

"I hope it's air-conditioned," Alice muttered as Emily paid the fare.

"Oh, I doubt it. They never have any money."

"Don't I know. They're always badgering me for donations. Because I'm famous, they automatically assume I'm wealthy. I

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guess they don't bother you."

Emily ignored that.

"Oh, look," Alice stopped. "That's where the class picture was taken." She pointed to the courtyard bordered by shade trees that linked the church to the school.

"See, I knew coming here would stimulate those memory cells. It's all stored in there," Emily said, tapping her temple. "You just need the right stimuli to bring it out."

"I hope you're right."

They walked up the stone steps to the massive oak door. Emily pulled on the iron ring. It wouldn't budge. She ran down the stone steps in her flat-heeled shoes. Alice followed more awkwardly in her high-heeled ones. Emily made a ninety-degree turn to the left. "Come on." She urged Alice forward along a flagstone path that wound around a flying buttress. The hemlock bush pricked their bare arms just as it had done years ago when they had played tag and hide-and-go-seek there. The path led to the back of the school and ended before a mud-brown door.

"Remember this?" Emily looked back at Alice.

"Of course. The door to the girls' cloakroom. We had no problem with the word 'girl' in those days. Wouldn't you think they'd have changed the color after all these years?"

"Nope. Saving money. If you do the same color, you need only one coat."

"The voice of experience?"

"You bet. Now watch this." Emily bent over the rusty doorknob and inserted something in the lock.

"Aren't you afraid an alarm will go off? This is the nineties, Emily."

"Relax."

There was a gentle click. Emily removed a small nail file and turned the knob. Alice looked nervously over her shoulder, but Emily was already inside, holding the door for her. It was on a spring. As soon as Alice stepped inside, Emily let it shut with a thud.

The room was dim. The only light filtered in from four slitlike windows above their heads. The two women stood still, letting their eyes become adjusted to the gloom. Alice sniffed. "Smells the same."

"Yeah. Sweat, makeup, and pee." Emily moved along the aisle between the empty coat racks. They were painted an ugly shade of green. Alice remembered snowy winters when they had bulged with coats, reeking of wet wool. The aisle led to a large porcelain sink and a mirror. How many times had they both worked on their hair, eyes, and lips in that mirror? Alice more than Emily, of course. Emily's idea of makeup was a dash of pale lipstick. Alice's was more lavish. Their shadowy reflections gazed back at them. Emily flicked a switch somewhere and their reflections became

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bright and sharp. Too sharp. Alice recoiled as she noticed two thread-thin lines framing her bright mouth.

"Oh, let's get out of here, Em. I'm getting claustrophobic," Alice said.

But Emily had retrieved a lipstick from her bag and was applying it. "For old time's sake," she said, smiling at Alice's reflection. "When I was in sixth grade, I once wore lipstick to school. I even remember the shade. 'Snow Pink.' You could hardly see it. But old Miss Oglesby pounced on me the minute I came into homeroom and ordered me to go wash it off. I was humiliated."

"I remember that bitch. She hated me. She was always shooing the boys away from my desk—even during recess. I think she was jealous. Once I caught her looking at me and her expression was actually frightening. I can only describe it as 'a hungry look.'" She repressed a shudder.

Emily laughed. "She probably was hungry. A dried-up old virgin. And there you were, taking your pick."

"I didn't sleep with them all, Em."

Emily turned from the mirror. "Why, Alice, you sound positively Victorian." She grinned. "Come on. Let's go upstairs. These pea-green walls do nothing for my complexion."

Alice couldn't help thinking that nothing would help Emily's complexion. It was sallow even in sunlight. Probably from spending so much time inside, reading those damned books. She wondered if candlelight improved it. Probably not. Candlelight probably gave it a greenish tinge. She shook her head, attempting to throw off such unkind thoughts, and followed Emily up the three wooden steps to the familiar stone corridor which led to the front hall. Although she had never admitted it, this vast space had always awed Alice. The high-timbered ceiling, the black and white tiled floor, and the stained-glass window over the oak front door (the one that had refused to open). The window depicted a sexless figure in blue with its hand resting on the head of an equally sexless child. Underneath was inscribed the school motto in Latin: "Go forth and become great," or something like that.

Emily strode toward the reception area, seeming quite at home. Alice followed more cautiously. An oriental rug bearing three overstuffed chairs and a coffee table were the only furnishings. Spread out on the low table were a variety of school publications—a literary magazine, the student newspaper, and a couple of yearbooks—for the edification of prospective parents while waiting to be ushered into the headmaster's office. As Alice was absorbing all this, Emily plopped into one of the sacred chairs, kicked off her shoes, and planted her feet on the coffee table. "I always wanted to do this." She wriggled her toes at Alice.

"Are you sure no one's here?" Alice looked around. "No stray

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teacher or watchman?"

Emily shrugged. "They close up completely the first two weeks of August. Maybe there's a security guard at night—" Abruptly, she slipped back into her shoes and stood up. "Let's take a look at the Senior Room."

"Let's," agreed Alice, a conspiratorial gleam in her eye. Gradually she was becoming Alice the schoolgirl again, Emily noted. The various skins she had acquired since school—drama student, understudy, promising actress, rising star, established star—had begun to drop off one by one as she penetrated more deeply into the school—and the past. Her high heels tapped on the tiles, unlike Emily's flat rubber soles which made no sound as they headed toward the broad polished wooden stairs.

The Girls' Senior Room was on the second floor at the end of the hall, right across from the Boys'. They passed between long rows of framed black and white photographs of previous graduating classes, dating back to the 1920's. They didn't bother to examine their own, having just dissected it thoroughly at Emily's. The door to the room was shut. Alice, in the lead now, turned the tarnished metal knob.

There they were; the thirty brown desks arranged in five rows of six each. And, in front, dominating them all, loomed the wider, chunkier teacher's desk. A dusty chalkboard covered the wall behind the teacher's desk and a bank of tall windows filled the opposite wall. A view of the courtyard through those windows was one of the perks which the seniors enjoyed. The large, round face of the clock looked down on them, showing no evidence of wear and tear from all the anxious eyes which had lingered on it over the years.

Alice stopped suddenly and Emily bumped into her.

"What's wrong?"

Alice closed her eyes and sniffed. "The smell."

Emily sniffed, too. "Oh, yeah. Musty books, chalk dust, and sweaty bodies. Some things don't change. Wait till we get to the gym!" She edged around Alice, into the room.

Alice remained on the threshold—mesmerized. "This wasn't just our homeroom. We had algebra in here, too."

"That's right." Emily was surreptitiously lifting the desk tops to see if their owners had left anything interesting behind.

"I hated algebra," Alice said fiercely.

And for good reason, thought Emily. You were the class dunce.

"I remember once Mr. Potts asked me to give the answer to an equation. Of course I hadn't a clue about it. And someone behind me whispered 'Z.' So I said, 'Z.' There wasn't even a Z in the equation. How the class hooted. And you should have seen Mr. Potts's face."

"See," Emily let a desk top fall with a bang. "It's working."

"What's working?"

"My experiment. By exposing you to sights, sounds, and smells

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from the past, I'm getting you to remember things." Emily drew Alice over to her old desk and pushed her down into the seat. It was a tight fit. The tops of her knees bumped against the bottom of the desk. But when she slipped off her high heels, she looked almost comfortable. "Now shut your eyes," Emily said, "and take deep breaths."

Alice obeyed and began to relax.

"Now think back over the class—Anderson, Bentley, Brown, Canby, Corelli, Dobson, Dobinsky, Evans, Ford . . ." She recited the entire roll call from their class of 1977 without a miss.

"How did you remember that?" Alice stared up at her.

"Easy. We heard it enough times."

"I guess I wasn't listening."

"That's because your name was Anderson. It was at the beginning. After your own name is called, you stop listening. But, as you know, my name is Wosky."

Alice had to admit, Emily was smart.

"Now close your eyes again and think over those names."

Alice obeyed.

After a few moments of silence, Emily said, "Now, which one of those people would be most likely to send you hate mail?"

Alice's eyelids fluttered. She had almost forgotten why they were there. "Don't open your eyes," Emily commanded.

Alice was beginning to resent Emily's role of arbitrary director and hers—of abused starlet. She opened her eyes wide. "Oh, Emily, this is silly. I can't think of anyone."

"Shut your eyes," she ordered.

Resentfully, Alice obeyed. Suddenly they flew open again. "Dobson. Cindy. She might bear me a grudge. . . ."

"Why?" asked Emily.

"Once, at a party, I locked her in a closet so I could go home with her boyfriend." She smirked at the memory.

"What happened?"

"Oh, nothing. I went out with him a few times and when I dropped him she took him back."

"Wow!"

"I know. Some people have no pride."

Emily had taken a small notebook from her pocket and was jotting something down.

"What's that?"

"Oh, just a list of possible suspects." She stuffed it back in her pocket.

"Some list." Alice sniffed. "A list of one."

"Come on," Emily said. "We've just begun. Shut your eyes."

"Oh, nuts." Alice was slipping back into her old school slang.

"Dobson . . . Dobinsky . . . Evans . . . Ford . . ." Emily chanted slowly.

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"Wait!" Alice raised her hand. "Meredith. Meredith Ford. I fixed her wagon once."

Emily waited expectantly.

"Remember how proud she was of her breasts? Used to strut around in those tight sweaters?"

"Yeah. She was the first one of us to show anything."

"Well, one day I was poking around the locker room. You know how we never bothered to shut our lockers during gym class. And I looked into Meredith's. Guess what was inside?"

Emily stared at her.

"A pair of falsies!"

"No kidding. What did you do?"

"I stole them. I stuffed them in my schoolbag and took them home."

Emily's eyes glittered. "And?"

"The next day, she came in as flat as a pancake. Of course, at recess—in front of a whole bunch of kids—I had to say, 'Hey, Meredith—you're not in very good *shape* today!'"

"Oh, you card. What did she do?"

"She turned beet red, pressed her books against her chest, and scurried down the hall."

Grinning, Emily took out her notebook and added another name to her list. When she put it back, she took something else from her pocket.

Phssst!

Alice was startled by the touch of something cool and wet on her neck. At the same time she was engulfed in the sweet, cloying scent of gardenias. Hundreds of gardenias. Thousands of gardenias. Spread in long white boxes on card tables in the front hall. Their creamy petals and dark green leaves lying in tissue-paper nests, waiting to be selected and paid for by the boys, to give to their favorite girlfriends. And all the proceeds went to some charity.

"Gardenia Day!" exclaimed Alice.

It always came in the spring. The second week of April. But you were never told the exact day. It was supposed to be a surprise. It was a school tradition. The minute you came into the front hall, that heavy sweet scent would overwhelm you, replacing the usual obnoxious school-building odors. All your hormones would start leaping and your stomach would contract as you wondered who would pin a flower on you? It was better than Christmas. It was better than Valentine's Day.

"Senior year, I got twelve," Alice gloated. "Almost half the class—of boys, that is."

"I remember," said Emily.

"You do? How many did you get?"

"I don't remember. But I remember you and Frank Osborne

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played a trick on someone that day."

"We did?" Alice's face was a blank.

"You bought a gardenia and placed it in one of the girls' desks and pinned a note to it. I'm not sure exactly what it said. 'To my true love,' or something equally original. And you signed it 'Don Lovett'—the most popular boy in the class."

"I did that?" Alice looked horrified.

"But that wasn't the worst of it. The poor girl was so thrilled, she rushed across the hall to the boys' homeroom and thanked Don. She ran straight up to him, with all the other senior boys milling around, and asked him to pin it on her sweater. And do you know what Don said?"

Alice shook her head.

"Nothing. He just looked at her. Then he laughed. And then some of the boys around him began to laugh. And then the whole roomful of boys was rocking with male laughter."

Alice's eyes widened. "What did she do?"

Emily shrugged.

"Who was it? You better add her to the list."

But Emily had turned and was heading back to the hall.

Alice caught up with her. "I always had trouble keeping all those plain-Janes straight," she said.

"I know," Emily agreed. "They all seemed to merge into one amorphous mass."

Alice glanced at Emily's profile. Not a single distinguishing feature. Too bad she'd switched to contact lenses. Those horn-rimmed glasses she'd worn in school had at least given her face a certain distinction. She glanced at her watch. "Let's call it a day, Em. I have a rehearsal tonight."

"Not till we see the gym. A lot of traumatic scenes took place in the gym. Maybe something will come to you there." Emily continued her soft, marching pace along the hall, down the stairs, and through the corridor which opened into the entrance hall. Instead of going into the hall, she made a sharp right turn, then a left, and stopped before a wide door. Mud brown again. She had to lean her whole body against it to force it open. The space that confronted them was larger than the entrance hall. The roof was as high as a cathedral roof. But instead of displaying stone vaults and tracery, its metal rafters were decorated with bundles of ropes and iron rings.

"Did we actually climb those?" Emily mused.

"I was never any good at it," Alice said, kicking off her shoes. (She had remembered—you never walk on a gym floor in heels.)

That was true, Emily thought, envisioning Alice in her black leotards. Her body had looked spectacular, but it was all surface. No substance. She had been a total flop at gymnastics. But that hadn't bothered the boys.

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"I always hated rainy days," Alice said, "because we had to stay in the gym and use this horrible apparatus."

With an effort, Emily shoved a heavy wooden horse away from the wall. The smell of the wood and leather brought back memories of that great day—the day she had won the school cup for gymnastics. She had been called before the whole school to receive it. She hied herself up and straddled the horse—a bit awkwardly because of her skirt. "Hi yo, Silver," she cried. But Emily knew she could never stand on her hands, shoot her legs out straight behind her, and clear the top without touching as she had twenty years ago. Not that she had gained weight. But her muscles were flabby. Maybe she should take a fitness class. She slid down the slippery wooden side and with a grunt shoved the horse back against the wall.

Alice was staring at the metal rings dangling from leather thongs above their heads. "Those were the worst," she moaned. "Once Miss Hawes made me hang from them for ten minutes. I thought my arms were going to pop out of their sockets."

Emily reached up and pressed a button on the wall. With a creak, the rings began slowly to descend. When they were just above Alice's head, Emily yelled, "Grab them, Alice."

"What for?"

"To jog your memory."

"Nuts." But she obeyed.

"Now close your eyes."

"Not again." But she followed instructions.

"Feel the cold metal?"

She nodded.

"Tighten your grip and think hard about all those rainy gym days," Emily ordered.

Grimacing, Alice did as she was told. The rings gave a jerk. Suddenly her feet were off the floor. "Hey!"

Another jerk, and she rose several feet in the air.

"Very funny, Em. Now let me down."

Another jerk and she was fifteen feet above the floor.

"Emily!" Her face became contorted with fear.

Another swift jolt and Alice sailed into the upper reaches of the gymnasium.

"Emileeeeeee."

Emily could no longer make out Alice's features. Her face was a white smudge against the lofty gym ceiling. But she could imagine the look of terror stamped there. And this time she wasn't acting. She watched Alice's legs pumping, as if pedaling an invisible bike. Those beautiful white legs that the boys had loved to set flailing against them. They were flailing the air now.

"Emil . . ."

The gym door swung shut behind Emily, cutting off Alice's wail. ●

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Art by Laurie Harden

HUNTER IN THE SNOW

by Raymond Steiber

The big man came into the office and planted nervous hands on the railing. The deputy thought that he looked like the actor John Candy—or how he *would've* looked if he'd survived into his late forties and lost a little hair. The man was red-faced and upset and kept mopping his face with a handkerchief even though it was hardly the type of day for it—temperature in the thirties and a promise of snow. He'd been up in the woods yesterday morning, he said, right above the road where it had happened. A buck had come leaping out of the brush below him—two years in a row without getting a deer and now here was one practically in his face. He'd spun and fired without leading properly and the buck had disappeared unharmed into the woods.

"It must've been me," he said. "I didn't hear any other shots. When I heard about it back at the motel—heard how that woman had been shot beside her stalled car—it scared me to death. I tell you, I almost ran. Ditch the rifle in a lake somewhere and hope nobody'd seen me up there. Then I thought, that's no good, that's no good. That'd make it murder when all it was, was an accident."

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"Where did you leave the rifle?"

"It's outside in the van."

The deputy rose from his chair, stern-faced. "Let's go take a look at it."

And then a few minutes later they were back again and the man was walking up and down and shaking his head and saying how relieved he was.

"It wasn't the same caliber rifle," the deputy said, "and I bet if you check you'll find you weren't even on the same road—you just panicked when you heard about the shooting and thought you were. And as far as it being a hunting accident, the way she was lying in the ditch, we don't know where the slug came from. She could've been shot right there—but not from close up."

"And I almost ran. Can you beat that?"

"You did the right thing coming in here—whichever way it turned out. I didn't get your name, by the way."

"Kandy. George Kandy. I'm in construction down in Chicago."

"You know, you look like that Candy—the actor, I mean. I thought that the minute I saw you."

"Yeah, people say that, but we don't even spell our names the same way."

He said again how relieved he was and shook hands with the deputy. Then he went out to the van and got in the driver's seat and his face changed. He was no longer the relieved deer hunter from Chicago. He was somebody altogether more calculating, and Kandy wasn't even that person's name. He had another rifle, too, in a black case under the front seat. It didn't even look much like a rifle unless you knew something about competition rifle events and the type of weapons they used there. And even then there were certain differences—the deadly .40-caliber slug it fired, for instance.

He started the engine. Now even if somebody had seen him out there, he was in the clear. He could go about his business without being troubled by the cops—the business that had been interrupted when the pickup had come along before he could search redheaded Vicki's car. And he'd set it up so smart. Well, you had to be prepared and that was it. Prepared for anything.

Raymond Steiber is a man of mystery in every sense. Not only does he pen mystery novels and stories, his instinct for what the reader should not be told carries over to introductory blurbs for his fiction. None of this author's editors has ever known much more about him than his mailing address—currently in Cary, N. C. From his fiction, one might guess that he has lived in other parts of the U S.; he certainly writes convincingly of Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

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She picked the car keys off the hook beside the sink and said: "I'm going now, Carl." She hesitated and then spoke again. "You could come with me."

He had his head down, stirring his coffee, though it hardly needed it anymore.

"Don't—don't you think you'd better handle it yourself? I mean, the funeral arrangements, all that. I'd just be—well, I wouldn't be useful. She was your sister."

She let out a sigh, and he risked a glance at her. Her eyes were still red from crying and her face was pale and puffy, but she was well groomed, neat. You could always count on that with Linda. Count on a lot of things, actually.

Their eyes met and she frowned. There was a sadness in that frown, and it didn't have anything to do with the murder of her sister.

She said: "You never leave this place anymore."

"I'll go in for the funeral. I promise."

"No you won't, Carl. You'll hobble off into the woods when the time comes. You and that dog. And when I call for you, you won't come, and I'll have to go alone."

He stopped looking at her and looked at the coffee cup instead and then at the backs of his hands. After a while the back door clicked shut—quietly, like a door closing on a sick room. He listened for the engine of the Toyota Cressida. That was one thing he did—keep that rusted old wreck running for her. It was like a pact he'd made—proof that he was still of some value to her.

She got the engine started and gunned it to keep it from stalling and then pulled out into the road. It was dirt and gravel out here, and she wouldn't hit pavement for another mile.

He got the two canes off the adjoining chair and planted them on the floor and lifted himself up. His thirty-five-year-old face was lined with pain. He remembered that Linda had once thought that he was handsome. He wondered what she thought now, and he wondered, too, what she'd think on that day—and that day would come, he knew it would—when he finally nerved himself to go out to the shed and get the rifle and finish the job the road smash had started. Maybe she'll be relieved, he thought. I could give her that much.

He moved painfully to the sink. She'd given up trying to hide the bottles on him, and now he kept one in plain sight in the cabinet. He mouthed a couple of pain pills and then drank straight out of the neck. The old dog—a Heinz, Linda called it, 57 varieties—eyed him from beneath the table. They understood each other. They understood that nothing much would change for either of them.

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He waited for the pills to have some effect, then began cleaning up. That was something else he did for his wife—another part of the pact. She was the breadwinner now, waitressing in town six days a week. She'd be losing money today, losing the dollar bills the deer hunters from the city left on the tables this time of year. After the accident, after the insurance money had run out, they'd lost the house, even had to go on welfare for a while. That was when he'd got the idea of winterizing his dad's old hunting cabin out here in the woods. He'd still had some hope back then, hope that the pain would ease and he'd be able to work again. Now—now he didn't even see people anymore. It was as if he were hiding from them—hiding from the shame of being worthless.

He thought about Linda. *At least she won't abandon me—there's too much old German Lutheran in her. Those people take their obligations seriously. She ought to, though, and I ought to help her.*

He hung there beside the sink and thought about the rifle again. Well oiled and ready, a box of shells on the shelf. He breathed shallowly and imagined taking it down and a low moan of sorrow escaped his lips. But just then the telephone rang. The cabin was basically one big room with a bathroom off to one side and a narrow bedroom above. He planted the canes and hobbled to the phone, braced himself and picked it up.

It was some fellow at a garage in town, and he wanted to know what they wanted done with the car.

"What car are you talking about?"

"The white Chevy—the one your wife's sister was driving."

He hesitated. "Well, I guess bring it out here," he said.

"It won't run."

"Well, tow it out then. You know where we live?"

He put down the telephone. A white Chevy—probably pretty new. He'd get it to run, all right. He'd get it to run for Linda. It would be like an offering.

The man who called himself Kandy had a T-bone at a tavern down the street from his motel. The tavern took him back. It was like the places he'd gone with his old man when he was a kid, Polish joints where the men hung out but where the wives were welcome, too. They'd all been yuppified now or urban-renewaled out of business. Well, things changed, and if you were smart you'd better change with them. Get into a new line—like Canova had with Krefeld.

He finished his meal and left the tavern. Outside the wind had picked up and it was slinging spicules of snow out of the darkness beyond the street lamps. He'd checked earlier on the car. They'd towed it up behind one of the service stations in town. Even if it hadn't been white, he would've spotted it immediately from the California plates. He thought: Get to be ten, eleven o'clock,

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weather like this, there won't be anyone around. And that was when he'd drift on by and take it apart. He made a bet with himself—that the dumb hicks hadn't even bothered to lock the doors on it.

He went back to his motel room and watched *Monday Night Football,* but his mind was elsewhere. Thing of it was, he didn't even know what he was looking for. Krefeld, when Canova had finally let him talk to him, had told him what she probably had. Transcripts certainly, maybe even voice recordings, and some of the product as well. Whatever it was, it wouldn't be in her luggage. The police had that anyway. No, smart, redheaded Vicki would have stashed it in the car someplace, taped it up under one of the seats inside a spring. A pretty good place as long as you didn't cross any borders.

She was smart, all right—smart enough to work in Krefeld's office awhile and figure things out and then blackmail him. Where she'd gone wrong was in not knowing that Canova was the banker and that the first thing he'd do when he was threatened was call for Kandy. That old crocodile wasn't about to lose his bankroll—not when a couple of ounces of lead would solve the problem for him.

There was another thing that Vicki hadn't figured on. Namely, that anybody would know about her sister and understand that was where she was headed with the package. She'd gone south, then juked east, but all along she'd been aiming for the Midwest and this patch of woods above Lake Michigan. Home, in other words, where the bright birds always flew. He'd been waiting for her the whole time, waiting right here—not that she'd known about him or how far Canova was willing to go.

She'd pulled in late at night and gone to a motel instead of straight out to her sister's. That'd been a break. It had given him a chance to fix her car so that it would stall out there in the Big Lonely. But then that damn pickup had come along before he could cover her body and he'd had to dive for cover in the woods.

The man who called himself Kandy looked at his watch. Time to go. He was a pretty nice guy, really. Waitresses and old ladies liked him at once, and he liked them back. It was just that every once in a while he took money to kill people.

He donned coat and gloves, stuck a *kupke* hat on his head—a black knit watch cap, that is. Braved the icy wind outside. There was a little more snow now. Not a lot—just enough to powder the sidewalks. He walked through it like a man with a purpose—which was what he was.

Even before he got to the closed service station he saw that the car was gone. He went the rest of the way anyway. There was even an empty space where it had been and now it was white with snow.

He stood there and said something that would have made all

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those old ladies who liked him blush. Or laugh. Or say the same thing back to him. And then, because he was Kandy and because, after all, he was being paid for this business, he began to think where the car might have gone.

He was alone in the cabin. The funeral was tomorrow, and Linda had gone in to work. They couldn't afford to miss the money, she'd said. That was a fact, but not the only one. The real truth was that she had enough gloom in her life right now without spending the day with him.

He looked through the window over the sink and the white Chevy was out there, its windshield a matching white with snow. It was only a year old, so once he got it fixed Linda would have a practically new car. And that put another idea in his head—that the beat-up old Cressida would be available for him.

He tried to go beyond that idea, to open it out a little so that it included the notion of a job. But when he began shuffling through the possibilities, they seemed to evaporate in thin air. He was a man who'd always worked with his hands, a *physical* man. He couldn't clerk somewhere, he couldn't sit behind a computer. And how many of those jobs were available around here anyway? Even so, the glimmer remained in his mind. The Cressida would free him, it would make it possible for him to move.

He thought: A man like me, a *working* man, if he's not doing something with his hands, he takes to the bottle. And then there's the pain—that just doubles the need.

But today at least, with that car out there, his hands would be busy. So he left the bottle alone this time and as he prepared to go outside only took a few pills.

The dog lifted its head as he stumbled about. Then it came out from under the table, infected by his mood. He braced himself and got the back door open, and the dog slipped through, almost upsetting him in the process. His tools were in the shed, and he eased off the back stoop, planted and swung one leg, planted and swung the other, and made for it. The air was heavy with cold, and both he and the dog left misty trails of breath behind them.

He stuffed what tools he thought he'd need in the pockets of his coat and made his slow, painful way back to the car. He opened the driver's-side door, and the perfume smell Vicki had left behind wafted out to him. So different from her sister. You thought of Linda and you thought of clean sheets and steadiness and home. You thought of Vicki and, well, it was perfume and clothes and new adventures. All the way out to San Francisco from the Upper Peninsula looking for them. And then comes back for a visit and some careless hunter puts an end to her. Or some maniac, he

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added in his mind. But no, it'd been a hunter, all right. Up here it was always some hunter.

He pulled the hood release. Hauled himself out of the car again, the dog dancing out of the way. Braced himself against the front of the car and felt for the catch and lifted the hood.

And spotted the problem right away—though it took him a few minutes to figure out the how, the *why*.

Those people at the garage hadn't even looked, he thought. And neither had the cops—but why should they?

It wasn't just that three of the six spark-plug cables were hanging down. It was that something had been run between them and their individual plugs and the mated ends of whatever it had been were still in place. There were little bits of twisted wire hanging out of them and shreds of crisped insulation. He stared at it. Stared at the remains of the alien wire and the scorch marks on the engine.

A piece like that, it wasn't just something you jury-rigged. It was something you made up special and carried around with you, maybe because you'd used it before. A bit of wire that you put between the cable and the plug and that couldn't quite take the current and eventually burned up.

And then the rest of it came to him. Somebody had done this deliberately. They'd done it so that the car would stall in a lonely place, and then they could just drive by and—but right there his mind stopped because it couldn't accept the thought that followed. It was too far outside his own experience.

He took the extra connectors off the cables and the plugs, juggled them in his hand a moment, then dropped them in his pocket. Then he reconnected the factory spark-plug cables and worked his way along the side of the car, not bothering with the canes. He slid into the driver's seat. He turned the key in the ignition. And the engine came to life without a protest.

He cracked the window and turned on the heater. Then he just sat there with his hands on the steering wheel. He didn't know what to think—or to be more accurate, he did know what to think but couldn't quite accept it.

Vicki had got into some kind of trouble out in San Francisco. And somebody had come after her to fix it. Somebody who had a habit of rigging cars so they'd stall in isolated locations. You could do that in a city, too. You could do that in San Francisco. Let's say a guy's pretty well protected when he's at home, but you can get at his car. So you fix it so that it stalls on the freeway. And then while he's in the breakdown lane looking under the hood, you, well, you just drive by and shoot him dead. *Pop!* Like that.

But that was movie stuff. There weren't really people like that. Even he knew that. It was all made up by writers and actors. And, dammit, this was the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Lake and for-

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est and gravel roads. And now snow again, tumbling out of the sky in big flakes and sticking to the windshield where he'd run the wipers once.

The dog was barking and whining. He leaned over and opened the passenger-side door and let her in. The dog leaped up on the seat and shook the new snow off her back. As he leaned over her to shut the door again, he spotted something sticking out from beneath the seat. It was one of those little bags you carried cassettes in. It had probably been stuck under there, and when they'd towed the car in over the gravel road it had jarred loose.

He retrieved it. Unzipped it. Took out a couple of the tapes it contained. They were all by artists he'd never heard of—well, one of them wasn't. Tony Bennett. He'd seen him once on television, he thought. An older man, sort of Italian looking. He turned on the dashboard radio and shoved the tape in the slot and heard nothing because it was jammed. So he took it out and shoved in another and now there was music. He was fiddling with the tapes to keep from thinking about what he'd found. Because it just didn't make any sense.

All at once the music cut off and there were voices on the tape instead. It sounded like a telephone conversation. Two men talking business. Something about computers.

He listened awhile, but he didn't hear anything special, anything, well, *incriminating*. It was all about imports and some sort of relabeling process and a ship with *maru* in its name.

He switched tapes to see if there was more like that. The next one was legitimate, as far as he could tell music all the way through. But a couple more were like the first. Music for a while—no more than thirty or forty seconds—then those voices again.

What did it all mean? Why had Vicki recorded it? Whatever it was, it had cost her her life—he was sure of that now. Sure in a way that had nothing to do with thinking, but was more like the process by which a photograph developed. Becoming clearer every minute, then becoming so real that you couldn't deny it anymore. It was just there—a part of the background of life—and had to be accepted.

He switched off the engine and scooped the tapes back in the bag. The last one in was the Tony Bennett and he noticed something funny about it. The heads of the black-painted screws that held it together showed bare metal. Somebody had taken this one apart. *Vicki* had taken it apart. The body was opaque so he couldn't see inside.

But he had the feeling that the only tape it held was the little strip he could see at the playing end.

Oh, that Vicki. She'd seen her chance and taken it and now her world was ashes.

So bright and daring. So unlike him and Linda.

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He climbed out of the car. He'd left his canes leaning against the front bumper. He worked his way along the hood to them, then headed for the cabin.

He was going to play those tapes one more time on the player in the kitchen. See if he could make any sense out of them. And then he was going to call the sheriff's office.

Kandy worked his way through the woods from the place where he'd left the van and saw the car in the yard. There was no snow on the hood, just wet, so he knew it'd been started recently. That guy in the cabin—that Carl Norden—would've seen the remains of the gizmos he'd rigged. Well, that was always a risk, but it still didn't connect anything to him.

So what did he do about the car? Come back tonight and search it and hope they didn't have a pit bull around somewhere. Holy crap, but he was afraid of dogs. Not all dogs—just the kind that came rushing at you out of the dark with their hair bristling and their fangs bared. But maybe he could prepare for that. Get some hamburger and soak it in antifreeze. Antifreeze would put a dog right down—if he took enough of it.

The snow was coming down pretty good now. Friend Carl would be sticking close to the woodstove in there. A heavy-equipment operator who'd got his legs crushed when he'd turned his pickup over on an icy road. Now, from what everybody in town said, he was going quietly to hell. One of those guys, the first time you hit him hard he didn't know how to get up again.

Not a guy to give you any problem, he decided. So what the hell—he'd take a closer look at the place.

He looked the car over first. All the doors were unlocked. He eased around and locked the one on the driver's side. He knew how most people's minds worked. They'd check first to see if the driver's-side door was locked, and if it was, nine times out of ten they wouldn't bother with the others. Which meant a free passage into the car this evening. But chances were, out here, they wouldn't bother locking it at all.

He checked the shed. There was a hunting rifle in there up on a couple of pegs. Not a good place for it. It ought to be inside where it was warm and not so damp. He shrugged. Not his problem.

He made his way along the rear wall of the cabin. The guy had a dog, all right, and now it started barking wildly. The guy shut it up. He was listening to something on the radio. No—on tape. Had to be tape because the voice he heard coming through the back door was Krefeld's. Bad news. Bad news all around.

He walked back through the snow to the van and hoisted himself up into the passenger seat. Well, old Carl had found the thing, but he hadn't yet done anything with it—like turn it over to the

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cops. Maybe he couldn't figure it out. You pretty much had to be on the inside to do that.

So the situation could still be salvaged.

The question was, when had he found them? Yesterday—and played them already for his wife? Or just this morning? He couldn't take the chance—he had to figure on last night. And that meant he'd have to bump both of them.

He thought it out. Get Carl right now. Put that part right out of the way. If anybody heard the shot, they'd think it was hunters. And out here nobody'd hear the shot. The wife was in town waitressing. He'd looked in on her before he'd come out. So he'd just wait in comfort and do her as she came through the door. Then gather up the stuff and get clear out of the area.

He reached beneath the seat and got the black case up on his lap and took out the beauty. It didn't have a clip. You loaded one round at a time and fired it. But one round was all he'd ever needed. The trick was to remain calm and not hurry. Take care of business first and then take care of getting out of there second.

He got out of the coat he was wearing and took an anorak off the backseat. The anorak had a special pocket under the left armpit where the beauty fitted perfectly. He got out of the van and donned the anorak and slipped the beauty into the pocket. Then he reached back into the case and got some spare rounds and stuck them in an outside pocket. He closed the case and slid it back under the seat. Then he went around to the driver's side and put the key in the ignition so he wouldn't have to fumble for it if he had to get out of there in a hurry.

The snow was coming down harder. It'd erase his footprints—one more benefit. He walked back through the woods toward the cabin. He came up on the backyard. The phone, he thought. Yeah, better take care of that right off. Don't give the guy a chance to fox things up at all.

He went right up to the side of the cabin and grabbed the telephone line and yanked it loose from its staples. The dog was barking wildly again. He didn't worry about it, and he didn't worry about Carl, either. That guy was a loser—a cripple. He'd be doing him a favor by snuffing him. He cut the line with a clasp knife.

He opened the anorak and slid the beauty out. Then he snicked back the receiver and got out a .40-caliber round and began loading it as he came around the side of the cabin. And there was the guy on the back stoop, leaning on two canes and staring at him. And there was the dog beside him—an animal that looked as if it had as many flavors as Baskin-Robbins and all of them ugly. And now the damned beast was off the stoop and coming at him. And holy crap—he wasn't even ready yet.

He whipped back around the side of the cabin. Thumbed the

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round into the chamber. Cocked the beauty. And blew the pooch to doggie heaven just as it skidded around the corner.

Dogs with their shoulder hairs standing up. Dogs rushing at him. His worst nightmare.

He came back around the side of the cabin, his heart hammering, but he reached smoothly for another round.

And there was the guy crossing the yard on his canes. Using them like ski poles and sliding his feet through the snow. Really moving, too—moving toward the shed. Where, Kandy suddenly remembered, the rifle sat on a couple of wall pegs.

He went after him, moving calmly, chambering a round, then setting himself for the shot. But his left foot skidded as he fired and the round missed the guy's right ear by an inch and put a neat hole in the side of the shed

This isn't happening, he thought. *This isn't happening.*

The guy was at the shed door now. He was fumbling inside. In another few seconds he'd have that damned rifle.

Kandy rushed after him, a little less cool now, a little less confident. His hand fumbled for a fresh round in his coat pocket, but he couldn't quite dig the one he was after out of the lining. And then there wasn't time anymore. He was at the shed, and he'd have to go in there and bluff it out. Get the guy down on the floor and *then* load.

He kicked the door open. The guy was reaching for the rifle.

"Leave it!" he snarled.

The guy froze, staring at him over his shoulder.

He raised the beauty. "I said leave it!"

The guy let his arms drop, bracing himself against the bench, one of the bright metal canes in his hand, the other just leaning there.

The bluff had worked. Kandy moved in on him, not giving him any leeway.

The guy stared. "I—"

Kandy cut him off. "Get down on the floor," he said.

"Your rifle—"

"Right now!"

But the guy shortened up on the cane instead. Then drove it full force into Kandy's head. Just before it connected, Kandy realized—not in words, not in sentences, but in the dawning recognition that precedes them—that this guy knew all about rifles—that *all* these people up here knew all about rifles—and that he'd seen that it was a single-shot and *knew* that he hadn't had time to reload. Then the cane slammed him and he was down.

The cane hit him again as he lay there. He couldn't believe how hard it hit him. He couldn't move.

A stool scraped across the floor. He heard that. Then the guy flopped down on it because he couldn't bend his knees and he

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wanted to get at Kandy. Kandy felt his hands being dragged behind his back. Then something went around the wrists—a length of wire and then a pair of pliers to tighten it.

He found his voice. "You better let me go," he said and was surprised at how frightened he sounded. "You're dealing with professionals and what are you, what are you? You're a loser."

The guy leaned closer. "Then what's that make you—to get taken by a loser?"

And Kandy didn't know how to answer him.

The two men from the FBI field office in Detroit were there. And the sheriff. And Carl and his wife Linda, just back from the funeral and still carrying the gravity of it. It was the same office where George Kandy had double-bluffed the deputy three days ago.

The Tony Bennett cassette lay on the table before them with its guts exposed. There were two tiny pieces of silicon wafer taped inside, one labeled, one unlabeled. The other cassettes were there, too, and the agents had listened to them and now they were able to give them some idea what it was all about.

"Computer chips. A special kind with an American patent and very expensive. Counterfeited in mainland China or Taiwan and then imported into the U.S. as ordinary types and relabeled. Then sold as if they were the real McCoy through a national distributor who was in on the deal."

"Is there money in that?" the sheriff asked.

"Huge money. And a very hard racket to bust. Foolproof almost, unless you have somebody like Vicki Kotke on the inside—a secretary who's able to tape the right telephone conversations and even palm some of the product. It's just too bad she decided to work for herself and not us."

Carl shook his head. "I couldn't figure it out from what I heard on the tapes. But I knew it had to be about computers."

"There might be a reward in this for you."

He raised his eyes. "Might there?"

"From the patent holder. We can check it out anyway."

They talked about it on the drive home. If it came through, it might be enough to get him on his feet again. Start some sort of business in town—a repair shop maybe. And, dammit, even if it didn't, why not just take a chance and try that?

Linda looked at him. "You'd have to quit hiding from people, Carl. Quit hiding the fact that your legs will never be the same again."

"I could do that. If I had a profession, if I was *working*, I could do it easy."

And all at once there was a little more hope in their lives.

And a little less pain. ●

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THE RATIONALIST

by William E. Chambers

Dennis Kent, which was the name he was using for this mission, peered through the slats of his window blinds and focused field glasses on the mark swimming in the translucent water. Two bodyguards stood on the deck of a rented motor launch, scanning passing pleasure boats and the white sandy beach with binoculars while Hector Velasquez indulged his passion for snorkeling. A passion, Dennis reflected, that would soon culminate in the ultimate orgasm, death.

Dropping his glasses on the lamp table next to the rattan sofa, he hefted and examined his scuba tanks, then turned his thoughts to God and Bertrand Russell. An odd combination, most people would think. But not strange at all to him. After all, Russell's philosophy made sense. His dictum that most of the problems of the world would be solved if people formed judgments based on evidence, and gave those judgments only the degree of certainty the evidence warranted, was a tribute to reason and scientific thinking.

Dennis glanced at his sports watch. 2:30 P.M. Velasquez would snorkel till three, then retire back to his room and probably join his mistress in a romp before showering and napping. Then he would emerge refreshed and ready for dinner in one of the island's many restaurants, as he had each evening since he arrived three days ago. So far, Velasquez had not chosen the same restaurant twice. Not that it mattered to Dennis, because the action was going to take place in the water anyway. Unless fate took a hand and presented an opportunity on land.

William E. Chambers is the author of two novels published by Fawcett Popular Library and numerous short stories that have appeared in magazines such as *Mike Shayne's Mystery Magazine, Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine,* and U.S. and U.K. anthologies. He has served as a director on the national board of Mystery Writers of America and for two years was the president of the New York chapter of MWA.

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Dennis walked into the bedroom, stood in front of a mirror, and flattened his curly brown hair down with a stocking cap. Then he placed a shoulder-length blond wig on, added dark glasses, and changed from shorts into white pants and a floral shirt padded to make him look twenty pounds heavier. This was similar to the disguise he'd worn when he accepted the contract. So far as his client knew, this was what he looked like. And this was what he would look like when he followed his prey to dinner.

Dennis sat sipping a mai-tai and watching the reflections of Velasquez, his two protectors, and his white-clad, mini-dressed mistress in the mirror behind the bar. They sat in captain's chairs at a round table near the wall directly behind him and chose courses, under the light of a Tiffany lamp, from large, leather-bound menus.

Dennis knew Velasquez was twenty-seven years old and figured his girl to be nearly ten years younger, which meant she would have plenty of time to get on with her life and many opportunities to use her long legs, bulging breasts, and flowing red hair to entice wealth from the men who crossed her path. He felt no guilt about removing Hector from her life. He was probably doing her a favor.

Dennis finished his drink, paid his tab, and walked back to his hotel reflecting again on God and Bertrand Russell. The dead philosopher's detractors labeled him an atheist. But Dennis thought agnostic was more the case, since Russell advocated keeping an open mind on all unprovable subjects, such as the existence of God.

Of course, Dennis disagreed with the notion that God's existence was unprovable. He theorized that no matter how many times you hurled the letters of an alphabet into the air, they would never land in the formation of a Shakespearean play or a Mickey Spillane thriller. Both types of work take creative intelligence and organization. By the same reasoning, how could this vast universe, with its myriad life forms, exist without a creator?

Obviously it couldn't.

But Dennis's belief in God did not extend to religion, which he considered to be a blend of morality and myth, bogged down by bureaucracy—although he did acknowledge that the organized clergy brought hope to the sick, the dying, and those misfits society gave up on.

Dennis stopped in front of his pastel-stuccoed hotel, breathed in the warm night air, and gently brushed away the palmetto bug that had dropped on his shoulder from the palm tree beside him.

He wouldn't kill anything innocent.

Dennis eyed his sports watch through the diving mask. 2:15 P.M. He inhaled and exhaled rythmically from his scuba tanks while

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clinging for cover in the algae and seaweed of a coral reef beneath the crystalline sea. His observations told him that Velasquez would be swimming in this direction to scrutinize the kaleidoscope of colors and the varieties of shapes of fish living in these waters.

Since Hector's bodyguards' duty was to look out for enemies, they spent most of their time watching everyone but their boss. So Dennis figured the distance between the motor launch and the reef was enough to allow him to nail Velasquez and get away before the deadly duo realized something was amiss.

Staring upward, he spotted the familiar yellow trunks and matching fins of a snorkler stroking lazily toward him. Swimming off at an angle, he circled the swimmer from behind. Dennis felt his heart hammer as he propelled himself upward with powerful strokes and kicks. Velasquez's face contorted and his mouth fell open as Dennis caught him by the crotch, twisted, and yanked. The snorkel floated away as Velasquez was pulled under.

Dennis kept his grip tight and swam downward using a much-practiced three-limb motion. Velasquez's eyes were wide with terror behind the diver's mask. The feebleness of his kicks and blows proved the effectiveness of Dennis's strength-draining attack.

Dennis calmly read his watch while Velasquez grew weaker. Most men couldn't handle two minutes underwater, but a trained person could do three. Since Velasquez was young and in shape, it payed to be careful. Dennis held him for thirty seconds beyond the three-minute limit even though his body showed no sign of life.

Then he let go and swam away.

Dennis continued his disguise and pretended to nap on the flight back to Miami. Sleep was the best way to avoid conversing with fellow passengers. By the time he reached his hotel, Hector Velasquez's drowning was a media event. So he used a pay phone and a prepaid calling card to dial his client. The man who answered said, *"Sí?"*

Dennis put gravel into his voice as he said, "Seen the news yet?"

"I have, my friend."

"Then you know the package is delivered."

"Sí."

"Then it's time for me to collect, right?"

"Name the time and place."

"You know the Nautilus Fish Fry on Collins Avenue?"

"Sí."

"I'll make reservations for lunch. Two P.M. tomorrow."

"I'll be there."

"Alone."

"Of course, my friend. You worry too much, *amigo.*"

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"Just cautious. That's all."

Dennis arrived fifteen minutes early and waited in a booth at the back of the restaurant. He had picked this time of day for the meeting because with the lunch crowd gone, privacy was assured. He wore the usual disguise with a couple of additions: A .38 snub-nosed revolver was holstered to his ankle and two pens were clipped to his shirt pocket. One contained a tiny transmitter and the other a vial of lethal gas.

One could never be too careful, Dennis rationalized.

When Alejandro Ponti arrived, Dennis waved him to the table. Slightly built and dapper in a white suit with black shoes and purple tie, Alejandro dropped a canvas duffel bag at Dennis's feet and shook his hand. An ivory smile beamed through the swarthy face. He said, "Congratulations."

"Just a job." Dennis shrugged. "Have a seat."

Dennis motioned the menu away and ordered drinks. After they were served, he said, "All there?"

"Take a peek."

Dennis unzipped the bag, leafed through it, then zippered it closed. "It's there."

"I wouldn't cheat you, *amigo*. Two hundred thousand is a small price to pay to be rid of Hector Velasquez. How did you do it?"

"How did I kill Hector Velasquez for you, Mr. Ponti?"

"*Sí*. I would like to know, if you don't mind telling me."

Dennis described the death scene in detail. When he finished, Ponti nodded. "Sounds good. But won't the autopsy show marks from your attack?"

"An autopsy probably would. Yes."

"Then what if Milo Velasquez learns that his brother might have been attacked?"

"The island doctors did a cursory examination of the body and ruled Hector's death a drowning. Milo made a tearful statement to the press about his brother's tragic accident—"

"*Sí*. I saw that."

"Well, then. I don't think you have to worry. You said yourself that Hector was the *brains* of the Velasquez drug cartel. Am I right?"

"*Sí*. With Hector out of the way, I should be able to convince Milo to merge his forces with mine. He liked the idea when I first proposed it. But if he thought I was responsible for Hector's death, he would come after me with everything he's got. Blood would flow in the streets and profits would dry up."

Once the forces were merged, Dennis thought, Milo would be eliminated. Hector had been smart enough to see through Ponti's

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scheme. "Don't worry." Dennis buried these thoughts and spoke reassuringly, "I'm sure Milo bought the story."

Nobody followed Dennis's car as he drove back to his hotel. He was certain of that. But he did notice the burly black man reading a newspaper in the lobby because he peered over it when Dennis walked in. As the elevator doors closed in front of him, Dennis saw the man walk toward the fire stairs.

Dennis's destination was the sixth floor but he got off on four instead. Common sense warned him of a double cross, so he'd rented rooms on two different floors. One room he had signed for in disguise, the other under a different name in his natural appearance.

Dennis knew the rational thing to do was drop the disguise and drive back to New York. But sometimes emotion overcomes logic. He didn't like the idea of being set up by his former employer. He also felt that Ponti's belief that he could be suckered so easily was an insult to his intelligence. And he felt obliged to answer that insult. So he entered his extra room, changed quickly, and rode the elevator up two floors.

When Dennis stepped out of the elevator, the black man emerged from the stairwell, his hand inside his nylon windbreaker. A puzzled frown crossed his face but he quickly regained his composure and smiled when Dennis asked, "Have you the time, sir?"

"Sure."

When he looked at his wristwatch, Dennis pulled a pen from his shirt pocket and sprayed a stream of gas into his face. Then he took long steps backwards as the man clutched his own throat and gulped for air. By the time he hit the floor, Dennis was back on the elevator.

The drive to New York was uneventful. When Dennis returned to his brownstone in Greenwich Village, he called the pub he owned in Tribeca under the name Dennis Quartrain. After two rings, a sexy voice said, "Quartrain's Quarters. May I help you?"

"Hi, Nadine. It's me."

"When did you get back from vacation, Dennis?"

"Just now. How's business?"

"Hopping."

"Glad to hear it. See you later."

"Glad you're back, Dennis."

"Thanks."

Dennis sat in his den and nursed a tumbler of scotch while glancing at the pictures that graced his walls. His brother Mark, in his Navy Seal uniform, was featured prominently. Dennis had

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admired his brother so much that he followed his lead and joined the Seals himself.

Mark had been killed leading a clandestine raid against a notorious drug lord in the Cayman Islands. Of course, his death was officially ruled an accident. Only after receiving top-secret clearance from the Navy did Dennis discover the truth.

Dennis served in Desert Storm as well as some other operations which were classified secret but he was repulsed by the fact that the government selected its targets for reasons political rather than moral. He learned quickly that Uncle Sam was often allied with evil regimes and vicious people. That knowledge made him decide to accept his discharge when it came due. Now he could pick his own fights.

Picking this one was easy. The newspapers were full of references to the alleged tensions between the Velasquez and Ponti cartels over turf. After learning all he could about the two rivals, he contacted Ponti and made him an offer. It took a little convincing, but Ponti finally went for the deal. The rest was history.

Dennis finished his drink and listened to a playback of his conversation with Alejandro Ponti. Then he sealed the audiotape into a package addressed to Milo Velasquez.

The results were not long in coming.

Within two weeks the massive bloodlettings of the Ponti and Velasquez drug gangs in southern Florida were top-of-the-line media stories across America and the world. Dennis Quartrain sat in his den and added up his accomplishments. He had killed a death-dealing drug kingpin, wasted a would-be hit man, caused a bloody gang war where dirtbags who deserved to die were killing each other off, and earned two hundred thousand tax-free dollars.

But the money bothered Dennis. It raised a moral question. Did he have a right to keep it? After all, it was dirty money. Dennis weighed the facts carefully, then made a decision. There were plenty of underfunded drug-treatment centers that sorely needed money. He remembered one run by the Catholic Church across town on Avenue A.

Dennis decided to disguise himself as a messenger and deliver the anonymous donation to the priest himself. Of course, he left before the package was opened. His only regret was in not seeing the expression on the good pastor's face when he looked at the contents.

Otherwise Dennis was pleased with himself.

He was sure Bertrand Russell would have been also.

And God, too. ●

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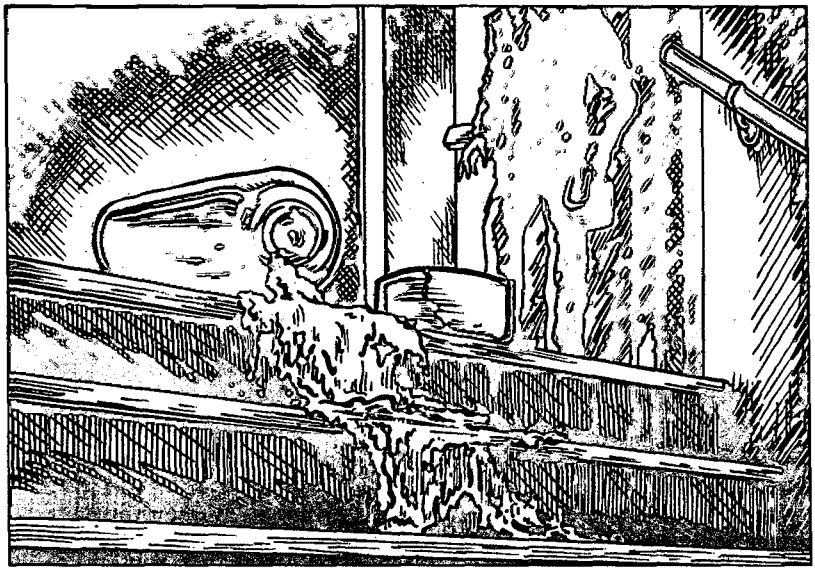

Art by Mark Evan Walker

THE LAST IS ADORATION

by Wendy Hornsby

Nancy awoke, as usual, fifteen minutes before Walt's alarm went off. The bedroom was frigid because Walt liked to sleep with a window open, even if there was snow falling outside, as there was that Friday morning.

How nice it would be, just this once, Nancy thought, to snuggle down into the delicious warmth under the quilt and go back to sleep for another few minutes. Or for half an hour or half a day: It wasn't as if she had to be anywhere until the Three Angel A's luncheon meeting in the church basement at noon.

The thought of her meeting impelled Nancy upward. Today was her turn to give a progress report and she had plenty to say. The opening phrase would begin, "I gazed down upon my sleeping angel this morning and . . ."

Nancy had to take a look at Walt for inspiration before she could

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finish her opening. She raised up on one elbow, holding down the quilt so that Walt wouldn't feel a gush of chilly air, and gazed at him over his shoulder. His face was smooshed into his pillow, his mouth hung open. As he snored softly, a crusty line of drool ran down his stubbily chin and onto the starched, ironed pillowcase. Strangely, the toenails of the foot he dangled out of the covers—she had to lean all the way over him to make sure that what she saw wasn't a trick of the morning light—were painted with clear nail polish. The temptation was huge to wake him just to hear how he would explain away nail polish. But she fought the urge and beat it.

An Edgar Award winner for her short mystery fiction, Wendy Hornsby was applauded with the publication of her very first book, *No Harm*, in 1987. Her work was called "refreshing, real, and raunchy" by the *New York Times*. More recently, *Publishers Weekly* praised one of her mysteries for its "literary excellence, originality, timeliness, and the promise of enduring contribution to our culture." We welcome her to *EQMM* with pleasure.

Not pretty, her Walt, she mused as she studied him. A good provider, certainly, but not handsome. Or kind. Or affectionate. Or . . . Nancy stopped herself before she got further into her old sin of faultfinding. She had made a new commitment to her life with Walt based on the Angel A's three-part vow. She would *accept* Walt, whatever his flaws. She would *accommodate* herself to his interests and desires as if they were her own. And last, she promised to *adore* him until death parted them.

Adoring Walt took greater strength than accepting or accommodating did. The effort it took to adore, however, gave her a sense of accomplishment and pride.

Nancy reached for her pale-rose silk peignoir as she slipped out from under the comforter. Her old flannel robe would have been more comfortable against the frigid morning, but what if Walt woke up and saw her in it, all lumpy and frayed looking? The first step toward the last vow—adoration of spouse—was making herself worthy of adoration in return.

In the bathroom, with the door closed so that the light wouldn't disturb Walt, Nancy washed her face and applied makeup; light makeup for early morning. Then she brushed and sprayed her short hair and when she was as adorable as she could be so early, she walked through a spritz of Walt's favorite perfume.

Walt was particular about the way things smelled. Some perfumes gave him a headache. This particular scent was one to which Walt had given rare approval after sniffing it on the neck of

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a restaurant hostess. Nancy had, at his request, bought this same scent for him to give his secretary at Christmas. She thought that perfume was a rather personal gift for a boss to give a young female employee, but better to risk crossing the line of propriety than to have her husband come home midday with a migraine. She didn't like the scent very much. It was too earthy for her taste. But she wore it daily to please Walt. Accommodation was, after all, the second step.

When the alarm went off, Nancy was in the kitchen whipping up a vegetable omelet made with egg substitute. The aroma of bran muffins baking filled the room. The orange juice she squeezed by hand because the sound of the electric reamer annoyed him was on the table, iced and ready.

Walt walked in just as the muffins came out of the oven.

"Good morning, my love," she cooed as she presented herself to him for a kiss. The silk peignoir billowed behind her, the lightest aura of scent embraced her; Walt did not.

"Morning." Walt slurped from the coffee cup she placed in his hand.

"How handsome you look today, as every day." Nancy pulled out a chair for him at the kitchen table. A single rose from her greenhouse rested beside his juice glass. "Your breakfast is ready, darling."

Walt looked between the pan on the stove and the carton of egg substitute on the counter and sniffed disapprovingly. "How many times do I have to tell you, I hate that fake egg gunk. You want to make me an omelet, crack something that's passed through a real chicken before you pass it on to me."

"Dr. Gray says we should look after our cholesterol."

"Then feed that phony crap to the doc." Still standing, he swallowed his juice in a single gulp. "I'm not hungry."

"You have such a long day ahead, dear." She held up the basket of hot bran muffins. "At least take a muffin."

He scowled at the muffins. "I'll get something on my way into town."

In the old days, Nancy would have snapped at Walt, told him what a fussy prick he was, and warned him that he would die a young man if he didn't eat what she knew was good for him. But that sort of screed ended when she embraced the Three Angel A's. She had graduated from step one, acceptance, a full month ago. If Walt was cranky, she knew now that the fault was hers for not accepting his preferences as her own.

Or was this an accommodation situation? Sometimes she felt all muddled on the differences between those two A's. Whatever, tomorrow Walt could have anything he wanted for breakfast. And,

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blessedly, she now knew exactly what she would say at the meeting today when it was her turn to deliver testimonial.

Taking pride that she had overcome both hurt feelings and the temptation to scold, Nancy walked ahead of Walt to the front door. She picked up his briefcase and held it out to him with a serene—she hoped—smile on her face while he put on his overcoat.

"Have a lovely day, my dear," she said, her voice sweet with adoration.

"Uh-huh," Walt said. He gave her a perfunctory kiss on the lips, which she accepted; Walt was never a morning person.

"What time shall I have dinner ready?" she asked as he took his briefcase from her.

"Dunno," he shrugged. "I may fly down to Chicago for a meeting. I'll call you if I stay over."

She stopped herself from clenching her fists. "Have a blessed day, darling."

He grunted something that she chose to hear as "I love you."

After Walt was gone, Nancy was ready to clean. She changed from her peignoir into jeans and one of Walt's castoff dress shirts, took her supply basket from the pantry, and, beginning upstairs, scrubbed her way down to the front door. By eleven o'clock every surface sparkled, and the laundry was washed, ironed, and put away. For her special project of the day, she relined and reorganized Walt's sock drawer as a way to fight down the image of his shiny toenails.

Last thing before she went upstairs to shower and dress for the luncheon meeting, Nancy unwrapped the three snapshots she had picked up from the framers the day before: Walt with his airplane, Walt with his fishing boat, Walt in his office with his secretary standing beside him.

Acceptance, accommodation, adoration—the photographs represented all three. Small planes scared her, boats made her seasick, the secretary couldn't type. "Accept, accommodate, adore," she repeated a couple of times as she arranged the framed photographs on the entry-hall table so that, first thing when he walked in, Walt would feel the blessing of all three Angel A's.

As she walked upstairs, Nancy was hit by inspiration: There was a container of homemade potato-leek soup in the freezer. If Walt was flying his plane down to Chicago in this cold weather, a thermos of hot soup would doubtless be welcome.

Afternoons, Elva Lovelace's downtown nail parlor offered a businessman's two-for-the-price-of-one lunchtime pedicure special. Elva's idea, and a fine one, she thought, was to persuade the gray-suit crowd that good grooming and good business went hand in hand. Or foot in hand, as it were.

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If men could pee standing next to each other, surely they wouldn't quail at side-by-side grooming. Besides, what better place could there be for two men to talk business uninterrupted than seated side by side for an hour in comfy leather chairs while Elva and her assistant, Carol, sliced off calluses, creamed cracked heels, and trimmed and buffed masculine toenails?

Elva converted an unused storage room near the salon's back door into a pleasant private parlor for this service, and furnished it in her interpretation of masculine preference. She made arrangements for a sandwich shop to make deliveries and installed a fax machine for the new clientele.

She had expected pairs of forward-thinking executives to fill the appointment book. As it turned out, the pairs who came into Elva's parlor for tandem pedicures were usually secretaries taking long lunch breaks, and not the bosses for whom the offer was intended. Now and again, the secretaries returned with their boyfriends. Sometimes those boyfriends were also their bosses. A mini-fridge stocked with wine was installed next to the fax machine and Elva would wait at the back door for the discreet souls who preferred to enter through the alley.

Friday turned out to be an unusually busy morning. The winter formal at the local high school was scheduled for that evening. Elva suspected that half the girls in the senior class had ditched classes so they could get their nails and hair done. When her regular noon-hour pedicure appointment didn't show, she was so caught up in the fun of formal preparations that the appointed time for her tandem had long passed before she noticed.

Just as well the regular hadn't come, she thought when she got around to checking the appointment book. First, the parlor didn't lose any money, because she and Carol had each finished two extra manicures during that hour, thereby also easing some of the crowding in the small reception area. Next, though the man was a good tipper and had referred some of his influential friends to her, there were times when his behavior in her back room with his henna-rinsed secretary made Elva, as the proprietor, feel a little cheap. The way the secretary would just reach up under her short skirt and pull off her pantyhose in front of her boss and Carol and Elva, and the way he made his wife the butt of cruel jokes—telling one and all, for instance, that his wife starched and ironed his boxers and arranged them in his drawer by color—were not in keeping with the high-toned ambience Elva envisioned when she first made her two-for-the-price-of-one offering.

Everyone knew you could set your watch by Nancy Mayhand. If the Three Angel A's called a meeting for noon, then by noon Nancy would have her contribution to the buffet luncheon set on

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the table with serving utensils at the ready, flowers from her greenhouse arranged and placed in vases, herself refreshed from a visit to the powder room and in her seat, prepared to offer her testimony. On occasion, a lady in the group might make a less-than-kind joke about Nancy's precision in all things. Nancy would shrug off any such remark as envy on the part of some less organized sister Angel. There was something a little bit scary about Nancy: a brittleness that barely covered her despair. She had so much energy and so much drive, if she snapped . . .

On Friday, at five minutes after noon, when Nancy had still not arrived, Mrs. Lipcott, the minister's wife, placed a call to the Mayhand home.

"No answer," Mrs. Lipcott announced when she returned to the ladies waiting in the basement. Sally Orchard started to say how nice it would be, for once, not to have Nancy dominate a meeting, but the look of genuine concern on Mrs. Lipcott's face stopped her. The minister's wife said, "I should call Walt."

Shep Huey was supposed to cover the office when his boss was at lunch. But Friday was a slow day. The boss, Walt Mayhand, never called in during his lunch hour on Fridays, so no one would know if Shep took off early. On that Friday, the boss had disappeared at ten minutes before noon. And who knew where Walt's secretary was?

At 12:20 Friday, Shep was sneaking out, using the private back stairwell of the Mayhand Office Tower, when he ran across the broken thermos halfway down. A building four stories tall didn't exactly make a "tower," to Shep's way of thinking. But the boss's wife had big ideas. Towering ideas, you might say. When she set her mind to something, Shep and the boss and everyone else had learned it was best just to go along. Considering all the grand ideas the woman had had over the years, giving an inappropriate name to a building was small potatoes.

Potatoes. Shep sniffed. That's what he smelled. Potatoes. The soup oozing out around the broken thermos looked like tomato, or maybe beet, but it smelled like potato. And there was a lot of it. Who would think that a little two-cup thermos could make such a big red mess?

Feeling put upon, feeling hungry—the soup smelled wonderful; earthy, feral—Shep lumbered back up the stairs to summon the janitor to come and clean up the mess. Maybe he chiseled on his time card, but Shep was a man of genuinely good character. He would not want anyone to slip and get hurt, even if he had to sacrifice some of his own stolen time to take care of the housekeeping.

Carla Pellagio sat in the cockpit of Walt's Leer jet, waiting. She had given up trying to retouch her week-old manicure. It was so

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cold that the polish just clumped up when she tried to brush it on. For this, she blamed Walt.

He had thrust their weekend bags on her and told her to call and cancel their weekly nail appointment because at the last minute "something came up." He would take care of business and be right along, he said. So, here she sat, coat buttoned all the way, her cashmere scarf, a gift from Walt, wrapped around her ears, ruining her hair. And still she froze: Walt liked her to wear skirts. Little itty-bitty skirts.

As soon as Walt showed up, Carla vowed, she would let him have it. She had decided that it was time for him to define for her why she should put up with so much discomfort for him. *She* had lugged both of their weekend bags down the back stairwell and out of the office and stowed them in the jet. *She* had made the hotel reservations in Chicago. And the dinner reservations, and bought the theater tickets, and ordered the wine he liked to be sent up to their room. Oh yes, and stopped on her way to the little executive airstrip to buy some new lingerie. For Walt. Everything to make it easier for Walt to spend time with her away from the prying eyes of everyone in town. As soon as he dumped that wife of his and made good on his promises . . .

Suddenly Carla remembered that she had forgotten to call and cancel their regular nail appointment with Elva. She checked her Rolex: too late. It was already 12:30. By now, Elva knew Carla and Walt weren't coming.

Monday morning, when they were back from Chicago, Carla would send Elva a check and some flowers so that Elva wouldn't give away their regular Friday appointment. That weekly pedicure session, and the post-pedicure session at Carla's downtown apartment, were the cement that kept Walt committed to her.

Carla checked her watch again. Walt was never late. He had told her five minutes. When she arrived at the airstrip, because she had stopped at La La Lingerie, she had expected him to be waiting for her—flight plan submitted, pre-flight checklist finished.

Carla pulled her scarf tight around her throat. Where was Walt?

Shortly after 12:30, Nancy Mayhand walked into the church basement. Her face was flushed; it was cold outside. A light snow had begun to fall.

Half of the Angels had already filled their plates from the buffet table and found seats at the long refectory tables arranged to form a large U, the other half were still in line. Nancy looked at her friends, all of them looking back at her, and then shrugged, as if resigned that they had not waited for her before they began serving. She set her Italian tomato-burger casserole among the hot

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foods, not even bothering to stir the obviously cold and congealing meat mixture at the edges of the bowl into the warmer center. There was no spill of winter roses in her arms, no vases. Nancy merely chonked a big serving spoon into the mass of meat and pasta and then took her place at the end of the buffet line.

All of the Angels watched this entry, all of them silent, agog. Only Mrs. Lipcott, the minister's wife, who always served herself last, walked over and put an arm around Nancy's thin shoulders.

"I was beginning to worry, dear," Mrs. Lipcott said. "Are the roads icy? Were you held up?"

"The roads? No." At first Nancy seemed distracted. Distraught, perhaps, as she clutched one of the church's thick pottery plates to her chest. Then, slowly, Nancy focused on Mrs. Lipcott's face. She smiled. She looked down at the plate. She relaxed. "It wasn't the roads that were icy."

Mrs. Lipcott gave Nancy a gentle pat on the shoulder. "Fill your plate, then find a seat. I'll bring coffee to you, dear."

Nancy caught Mrs. Lipcott's hand as the older woman turned toward the coffee urn.

"My dear?" Mrs. Lipcott raised her brow.

Nancy extended her empty plate toward the minister's wife. "Thank you, Mrs. Lipcott, but I'm not staying today."

Mrs. Lipcott looked from the plate to the parishioner's perfectly made-up face. "Are you ill?"

"No. I'm fine." Nancy surveyed the semicircle of expectant faces staring at her; there was precious little friendship among them. "It's just that I have no testimony to give today. I accepted, I accommodated, I tried to adore. I'm tired, Mrs. Lipcott. And I have absolutely nothing left to say."

Nancy turned and walked out of the church basement.

After Nancy Mayhand left, Mrs. Lipcott noticed that she had left a trail of tomato-sauce footprints. Perhaps some of her casserole had spilled and Nancy had walked through it. Mrs. Lipcott was afraid that someone might slip on the red sauce; everyone knew how thick Nancy's sauces were. She moistened a paper towel and began to wipe up the footprints, working her way toward the door.

It was well past her usual lunchtime, and the minister's wife was hungry. Nancy was such a wonderful cook. Even if Nancy Mayhand could be challenging, demanding, self-involved, Mrs. Lipcott would miss her buffet luncheons.

The aroma wafting up from the towel was spicy, earthy. Feral. Mrs. Lipcott was reminded of the perfume her husband had asked her to buy for the church secretary at Christmas. ●

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Symptoms of Loss

by Jerry Sykes

When I was a kid it seemed like every radio in the country was tuned to the same station.

Walking home from school on a hot summer afternoon I would catch the loose fragments of a song as they drifted through a stream of open windows and listen as they would roll into another three-minute twist of sound and emotion. It was as if each radio was a tiny speaker connected to an invisible jukebox loaded with all the hits from down the years, the music that had become as much a part of the atmosphere as the air we breathed.

Short story writer Jerry Sykes hails from London, but his stories have found homes in many U.S. anthologies, including *Love Kills*, *Future Crimes*, and *The Year's 25 Finest Mystery Stories*. He is a winner of Britain's highest award for crime fiction, the Gold Dagger. He is also the editor of an anthology entitled *Mean Time*, whose theme is the end of the millenium. ¶

Like most people, I remember many of the songs from my childhood, although very few hold any special significance. It is only later, in adolescence, that we begin to attach certain records to defining moments in our lives, the heartfelt playlist invariably displaying symptoms of loss. As a child, music is very much in the background, a soundtrack to our eddying emotions.

The radio in our house sat in the kitchen, and the abiding image of my childhood is of my mother, hands plunged deep into suds and staring out across the back garden, providing whispered harmonies.

She had been a professional singer back in the early sixties, nothing fancy, just one of a stable of backing singers contracted to one of the major record labels, but she had sung on a number of top-thirty hits. Photographs of her at the time show that she had mastered the look, all solid hair and panda eyes, but she was destined never to make it out of the chorus.

My mother first met Greg Price, a skinny kid with dreams of stardom who would practise his Elvis swivel in the mirror until his legs ached, in September 1961 when they shared backing vocal

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duties on a Christmas record for some starch-hipped crooner. By the time the single hit number five the week before Christmas, my mother was pregnant and they were living together in a cold and damp fourth-floor bedsit in Hornsey. They were married on the first Saturday of the new year.

In May, 1962, my father was killed in a hit-and-run accident as he walked home from a late-night recording session. His body was found slumped against a lamppost early the following morning by a man out walking his dog, the dog walking in lazy circles around my father and barking in his face.

My mother never remarried, although she was only seventeen when I was born in July that year. I remember a number of boyfriends, but none of them seemed to be around for more than a couple of months. Not that she was lonely; she had a wide circle of friends and my Aunt Celia would often come and stay with us for long periods of time, usually following a breakup with her most recent husband (four at the last count).

My mother loved the sweet soul music of Philadelphia and Motown, Curtis Mayfield and The Isleys, and I would often lie awake at night listening to her singing along with the radio in her tobacco-deep voice. I would imagine her standing in a pool of warm moonlight, hips moving in rhythm with the music, and my heart would trip with joy.

A few days before she died, I sat at her bedside and listened as she told me she had asked the minister to play a song at her funeral and he had agreed. She would not tell me the name of the song, and in the days immediately following her death I hid from grief in trying to figure out what it might be. She had a black sense of humour, and I soon narrowed it down to a shortlist of three: The first two on the list—Harold Melvin's "If You Don't Know Me by Now" and The Chi-Lites' "Have You Seen Her"—were a bit too obvious and in the end I settled on Marvin Gaye's "Abraham, Martin, and John" with its poignant and telling refrain ". . . only the good die young."

But nothing could have prepared me for that moment when the minister hit the Play button and the cool morning air was filled with the hiss of the small tape recorder giving way to a galloping drumbeat that roared across the small church like a parade of wild horses.

It took me awhile to place the song, but after a moment I recognised it as The Tornados' "Telstar," an instrumental from the early sixties that was a hit on both sides of the Atlantic. There is no doubt that my mother would have known the song, but as to why she had chosen it to be played at her funeral . . .

I glanced around to check the faces of the other mourners. At my mother's request it was a small crowd, mainly friends she had known for a long time, people I had grown up with, crossing paths

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every couple of years. I saw no trace of recognition as the tape poured out the remains of the song. Most of the faces seemed to stare straight ahead, heads gently tilted back to stop the tears from falling, mouths tight in concentration.

Except for my Aunt Celia.

She held her face up to the ceiling and I saw a knowing smile grace her lips, crinkling the corners of her eyes. I stared at her, willing her to look over, and after a moment or so I was rewarded as her eyes flickered in my direction. Her smile seemed to jump out at me and I found myself smiling back at her.

It had been four years since I had last seen Celia, since my mother had moved out to Kent, and I had only spoken to her briefly before the service, but as I turned to face the front again the years slipped away and I caught a glimpse of myself in grey flannel shorts and knotted hair, always knotted hair.

"Telstar" returned to the rumbling of the turntable (my mother had made the tape herself, not even the minister had been allowed a preview) and the minister pushed the Stop button on the tape recorder. After the service I thanked him for his kind words and for carrying out my mother's last wish and invited him back to the house for a drink.

A couple of days later I drove into London to visit my mother's solicitor.

It was a cold March day and the grey sky was filled with rolling clouds as I drove through the City and up into Islington. I left the car in Sainsbury's car park and walked through to Upper Street where the office was located over a remainder bookstore.

The stairwell smelled of paint from the DIY store next door, and as I reached the first-floor landing I felt a little lightheaded and my vision briefly rippled in and out of focus. I pushed the door to the outer office open and entered a small reception area. A heavy-set woman of around forty lifted herself from behind an old wooden desk and smiled, running her hands over her hips.

"Mr. Price, so sorry to hear about your mother. A lovely woman. You must forgive me for not coming to the funeral but we only heard the news yesterday when Mr. Rhodes got back from holiday." She came around the desk with both arms extended and for a moment I thought she was going to hug me.

"That's okay, it was only a small affair," I said, holding up my hands in a calming gesture to keep her at arm's length. "I'm sorry, Mrs. . . ." I pursed my lips, slowly shook my head.

"James," she said, stopping so close to me I could smell her perfume, or maybe the paint fumes had penetrated this room as well. "Audrey James. I knew your mother quite well, although of course we didn't see each other much since she moved out to Kent."

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"No, she seemed to lose touch with a lot of her friends."

"Anyway," she continued, "Mr. Rhodes is expecting you; you can go straight through." She gestured to a door to the rear of her desk. "Can I get you anything?"

I nodded, still feeling the effects of the paint fumes. "Just a glass of water, thanks."

"A glass of water," she repeated, committing it to memory, and headed through the outer door.

I knocked on Rhodes's door and walked into his office.

He was standing at the window looking down at the traffic on Upper Street but turned as he heard me enter the room. He was a tall man, over six-six, and uncomfortable in his frame. To compensate he had developed a stoop, his head hanging low as if his neck stuck out horizontally instead of vertically from his torso. A navy pinstripe suit hung from bony shoulders and his long fingers looked like fleshy links of chain protruding from the cuffs.

"Ah, Jeff, how are you doing? Bearing up okay?"

I shrugged. "Fine, I suppose. As good as can be expected."

"Good, good." He spread his arms out in front of him. "Take a seat, make yourself comfortable."

I lowered myself into the dark green leather sofa set to the side of his desk.

Rhodes placed his hands above his hips and arched his back before settling behind the dark mahogany desk. He began rifling through some papers, slipping them back into blue folders. "If you'll just bear with me . . . How's Nancy?"

"Fine."

"Kids?"

"They're okay. A bit young to understand, you know, although I do feel I should try and explain . . . heaven and hell and all that."

"Heaven and hell, yes, good," he mumbled, distracted. "Ah, here it is." He pulled a file from the stack at the side of his desk, read the label. "Er, no, not that one. Sorry . . ."

Rhodes continued to look through the files.

My mind drifted back to the day of the funeral. "Presumably you've looked over my mother's file since . . . since her death," I said. He peered up at me through twisted eyebrows, nodded imperceptibly. "I don't suppose you came across anything about 'Telstar'—you know, the record from the sixties?"

Rhodes leaned back in his chair, a grin spreading across his face. His huge hands grasped the edge of the desk. "She told you?" he said.

I shook my head, puzzled. "It was played at the funeral, she asked the minister . . ."

He frowned, the lines in his forehead forming a deep V. "So she didn't tell you?"

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I didn't understand and raised my hands in submission, shook my head again. "Tell me what? She told me she'd asked the minister to play a song at the funeral, a tape she'd made. 'Telstar.' I never heard her mention it before."

Rhodes hunched over his desk, threaded his long fingers together. He looked like a vulture sitting on a rock. "In her will, your mother left you just short of a million pounds in performing royalties from the recording of 'Telstar.'"

I looked at him blankly, trying to get a hold on the information he had just imparted. I searched for a betrayal of the words in his eyes, but all I could see was true pleasure at the delivery of the surprise.

"Performing royalties? I don't understand. My mother, ah, *performed* on 'Telstar'? She was a singer, a backing singer. 'Telstar' is an instrumental."

"Well, as far as I am led to believe—and all that I have to go on is a letter from your mother—it was, in fact, your *father* who performed on the recording. And therefore, quite naturally, upon his death the royalties transferred to your mother, his wife."

Although we had never been poor, my mother and I had never had the sort of lifestyle that a million pounds could bring. "So where has the money been all this time?"

"A trust fund was set up in your name. To be realised upon your mother's death."

"And you didn't know anything—"

Rhodes cut me off with a shake of his head. "The first I knew of this was when I opened the letter yesterday morning."

"Did she mention anything else about my father?"

"No, nothing. She never talked about your father. "

We sat in silence for a few minutes, absorbing the news. Rhodes eventually began detailing the remainder of the will, but I had wandered into the shadows and alleys of my childhood and his words broke apart and disappeared before reaching my ears.

I knew very little about my father and had often wondered about him, but every time I thought about asking my mother I would be overcome with a terrible guilt, as if the very act of asking about him was to admit to my mother that her love was not enough. I had not even seen a photograph, and over the years my image of him had come to feature a blond Elvis pompadour dripping over a handsome face twisted and scarred by the elusive bittersweet taste of success.

The revelations about "Telstar" brought the image a little more into focus and with it a new determination to find out more about him.

Just north of Holloway Road Station I pulled over behind a dark green VW van and climbed out of the car. I waited for a break in

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the traffic and then ran across the busy road. I stood on the edge of the pavement to avoid the crowds of people shuffling through the morning and took in the building before me.

The ground floor now formed part of a bicycle shop that sported a huge yellow sign running the length of three storefronts. Rows of bikes from kids' to professionals' were lined up outside the shop and neon-glow shirts filled the windows.

The circular blue plaque fixed to the wall between the windows on the floor above read:

JOE MEEK
RECORD PRODUCER
"THE TELSTAR MAN"
1929—1967
PIONEER OF SOUND
RECORDING TECHNOLOGY
LIVED, WORKED, AND
DIED HERE

There are maybe a couple of hundred similar plaques scattered throughout London, each commemorating the life and work of people who have lived in the capital and located on the buildings most famously associated with them. Because of a twenty-year-dead rule, the majority were for people of whom I had never heard or had little interest in. I had seen the plaque in Holloway Road on many occasions and it didn't tell me anything about Meek that I didn't already know.

An independent record producer before the term was invented (he had often been dubbed the British Phil Spector), he had created a number of hits in the late fifties and early sixties before the world-wide success of The Tornados' "Telstar" (named after the first communications satellite) in 1962 had made him a household name. A promiscuous homosexual, the more famous he became, the more terrified he became of being involved in a scandal that would jeopardise his career. The terror had eventually led to his suicide in 1967, ironically the year in which homosexuality had ceased to be illegal.

I ran back across the street and pointed the car in the direction of the Central Library.

A huge Victorian slab of weathered stone, the inside of the library looked more like a video-rental store but I managed to locate a couple of books that touched on Meek and "Telstar."

I could find no mention of my father, although I did come across a listing of the musicians that had played on "Telstar"—guitar,

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bass, keyboards, drums—so unless my father was working under a pseudonym, something strange was happening. And while it was true that many singers at the time had their names changed to conjure up images of hot and rugged masculinity, the same could not be said for the backing musicians. That was certainly the case with "Telstar."

As for Meek himself, there were a couple of interesting facts concerning his extracurricular activities. In 1963, he was arrested and charged with importuning in a public place, an event that served only to fuel his paranoia and lay him open to threats of blackmail. Even more interesting was the fact that prior to his suicide, Meek had shot and killed his landlady in a tormented rage over the possibility of being questioned by the police over the murder of a teenage boy. There was no suggestion that Meek himself had been involved in the murder in any way, but this time the fear had obviously been enough to push him over the edge.

Perhaps the most telling item of all, and certainly from my perspective, was that in the early sixties musicians (including those in successful groups) were simply hired hands and, as such, were paid a flat Musicians' Union rate for any recording sessions they played on, regardless of the outcome, demo or record, hit or no hit. The record company or, as in Meek's case, the independent producer, would retain all the rights to and subsequent royalties from the performances.

I left the library and wandered up to Highbury Fields, where I sat on a bench and watched two men in suits kicking a football around, their red faces bubbling with perspiration. I thought about the million pounds and tried to retrace its route back to my father, but whichever way I turned it was an immediate dead end.

On the way home I drove through Camden Town and stopped in at Tower Records. As I expected, there was nothing under Meek or The Tornados but there was a whole pile of sixties compilations, mainly from '63 and The Beatles onwards, and I managed to find one that contained "Telstar."

As I listened to the track over and over I began to hear a kind of wailing sound hiding behind the drums as the song faded into darkness. The sound was not quite human, but it was the closest thing to a vocal on the record and I wondered if it was in fact the sound of my father's million-pound performance. And then again, maybe it was just the sound of the silent scream of frustration in my head.

The following day the girls began asking questions about their grandmother. Since she had fallen ill and moved down to Kent a few years earlier they had spent a lot of time in each other's company and now, a week after her death, the girls were beginning to sense that something was wrong. Nancy could see I was still a lit-

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tle shaky and offered to break the news to them for me. I gratefully accepted and left her to it.

I drove over to my mother's house with the intention of sorting through her belongings. We had put the house on the market and the place needed to be cleared. Most of the stuff would be going straight to the charity shop, but I wanted to sort through everything first to see if there was anything personal that I wanted to hold on to.

My mother had moved from a cramped two-bedroom flat into a spacious three-bedroom house and, as she had never been a hoarder, her belongings rattled around the cold house.

I spent a couple of hours moving all the items intended for charity into the front room; all personal items I stacked into a cardboard box on the kitchen table to be taken home and sorted through later. As I worked I had a feeling that I was being watched, as if someone was looking over my shoulder, a sense of being temporarily haunted.

I left the bedroom until last, believing that that would be the place where I was most likely to come across anything concerning my father. But my mother had never been one for sentiment and the only thing of interest I found was an old shoebox containing twenty mint copies of "Landing Lights," the first record she had sung on, a stack of eight-by-ten promotional photos turning brown and curling at the edges, and a reel of tape from an old reel-to-reel tape recorder. I put the shoebox in the cardboard box on the kitchen table and then carried the box out to the car.

Celia Drake emerged from the patio doors carrying two cold cans of beer. She handed one to me and pulled the tab on the other, pouring the beer into a long glass before settling on the wooden bench and tucking her feet up under her thighs.

She offered me a cigarette and when I shook my head, she lit one for herself, tossing the match into a glass ashtray on the table between us. Her green eyes were violently alive in the sunlight.

I popped the tab on the beer and took a long swallow.

"You never met my father, did you?"

Celia shook her head. "No, that was before my time. I didn't meet Meg until, oh, sixty-four, I think. Sixty-four, sixty-five, sometime around then."

"My mum ever talk about him?"

A frown creased her face. "Not really. Maybe in the abstract, as if he was an interesting place she'd once visited or something." She fixed me with a stare. "Why, you keen to find out about him now?"

"Yeah, well, I always felt a little awkward before, you know. But I thought that now Mum's dead . . . " I shrugged. "Besides, I always got the feeling she was making it up as she went along

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when she spoke about him."

She lifted her face to the sun and smiled. "I know what you mean."

My mother would often make up stories about my father, romanticising him, bedevilling him, weaving him into tales that I myself had read in the Sunday papers or seen on TV.

Celia pulled on the cigarette and blew a streamer of blue smoke into the air over her head. She looked at me with a directness I had never seen before and said, "You're going to find out sooner or later, so you might as well hear it from me. Your mother and father were never married."

For some reason, this did not shock me as much as I thought it would. Or Celia. She saw the lack of response in my eyes and said, "You don't seem surprised."

"No. I guess I never really thought of my mum as having been married. I mean, it was all over before I was born, and . . . well, I've never even seen a wedding photo or anything like that."

"Your father was just a kid who only ever wanted one thing in his life. To be a pop star. So what's he gonna do when he finds out your mum got herself knocked up? Put on a suit and go out and get himself a regular job? Besides, the way I understand it, Meg was not the only one to fall for his charms."

"But she still used his name."

Celia shrugged her shoulders. "It was nineteen sixty-two. They were still locking up single mothers in mental hospitals back then, you know."

I took a sip of beer and looked out across the lawn; purple crocuses poked through the faded grass. I had not mentioned my inheritance to Celia; I wanted to piece together the story of my father without any prompts or false leads. "You remember how he died?"

"Sure, he was hit by a car when he came out of The Rainbow one night. He'd been to see Billy Fury or one of those other guys he always wanted to be and stepped right out in front of a car. I heard he was a little drunk."

"Did anyone see it happen? Anyone with him?"

Celia shook her head. "I don't know. Meg never really talked about it."

"Would he have made it, do you think?"

"As a singer? Well, she always said he had a good voice, and I think he did have some sort of deal with Joe Meek lined up when he had the accident. You know, the Telstar guy."

I nodded, a loose smile of recognition playing on my lips.

She pointed at me with her glass. "Bill Jackson, that's who you want to talk to. Shared a flat with Greg round about the time he was killed." She leaned forward and added, "Knew your mum, too. She had an affair with him right after you were born. Didn't last long, but they were pretty close and stayed friends afterwards."

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"So he's still alive?"

"Had a card from him just last Christmas. He lives down your way on the coast somewhere near Deal." She gently tapped me on the arm. "I'll go get the address for you," she said and lowered her feet to the ground and walked into the house.

The thought of my mother being in love filled me with an unbearable feeling of sadness and when I moved to hug Celia before I left I felt a tear squeeze from my eye and my heart swell with warmth and pride at my mother's selfless devotion. I knew that she had had boyfriends, but how could my young heart have known if she had truly been in love and had put that love aside to care for me.

Deal was one of those old seaside towns that had died with the advent of cheap package holidays in the mid sixties; it seemed appropriate that a musician whose career had been all but over when The Beatles were still in Hamburg should have chosen to retire there. As I drove through the outskirts of the town I tried to imagine what the place must have been like in its heyday, but none of the images that flickered in my head had any connection to the sad grey buildings and sad grey people that slumped along the side of the road.

I drove along the seafront past the pier. A number of people braved the cold wind blowing off the sea and a cafe at the end appeared to be open, but the whole place had the feeling of having been abandoned: a commuter town where everyone had forgotten to go back home again.

I headed out towards Kingsdown and as I moved into the countryside colour began to bleed back into the landscape. I found the village without much trouble and, after stopping to ask directions in the village store, followed a narrow lane down to the coast road. Between the road and the sea a dozen or so wooden chalets kept watch across the channel.

I left the car on the road and walked up the narrow pathway to the sky-blue chalet in the centre of the row and knocked on the door. The chalets appeared to consist of a single room and I wondered how safe they would be in a storm; only fifty feet of pebbled beach separated them from the sea. The pastel paintwork only added to the sense of fragility.

Jackson was home, and after I introduced myself he ushered me through the front door. I scanned the room: Partitions in the two far corners isolated what I took to be a bedroom and a bathroom; a kitchen crept into the living area from the wall directly to my right. A battered acoustic guitar was the only sign of his past.

Jackson was a wiry man with his hair brushed back in a threadbare DA, wearing drainpipe jeans and a fisherman's smock. His eyes still held a boyish light and I wondered what had brought

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him to this isolated corner of the country. He made a pot of coffee and settled into an old armchair below the rear window. I pulled out a chair from the small dining table and sat facing him.

I started to ask him about my father but he held up his hand and stopped me. A dark sadness befell his eyes and he took a deep breath. "Joe Meek didn't used to write songs; he used to hear the completed record in his head and then try and capture that sound on tape. His flat, his studio, was always full of musicians: There'd be the rhythm section in the living room, guitar and vocals in the bedroom, keyboard in the loo, strings out in the hall, and the brass section lined up down the staircase. Joe would be in the kitchen with his equipment pulling it all together. And if he didn't hear the sound he wanted, well, he'd try something else. I once saw him stamping on the bathroom floor to get just the right drum sound he wanted. He wasn't afraid to take risks and try something new. It was that same 'out-thereness' that pushed him to take risks in his private life and leave himself open to predators.

"Your father wanted to be a star. He thought Billy Fury was the greatest singer he had ever seen, 'Halfway to Paradise' the greatest song he had ever heard. He was like that, Greg, everything was big, he had no time for anything less. Fury was greater than Elvis, greater than Buddy Holly, and Greg Price was going to be bigger than all of them.

"He had some kind of deal with Meek to record a couple of songs with The Tornados—Greg liked the idea that they'd originally been Fury's band, as if he'd stolen them from him or something. But then Meek changed his mind. He had the idea for 'Telstar' and wanted the band to become some sort of keyboards-led Shadows; the Shadows were incredibly popular at the time and Meek wanted a piece of the action. Greg was furious. He tried to blackmail Meek about his homosexuality, but Meek was already being leaned on by a bunch of goons and when they got to hear about it . . ." He drew a finger theatrically across his throat.

I stared at the man, incredulous. "Are you saying my father was murdered?"

"Well, it's more of a gut feeling, I don't have any proof."

I nodded for him to go on. I could feel my heart beat against my rib cage and my face felt numb. Suddenly a man who had been killed before I was born was the most real person in my life.

Jackson's shoulders had slumped and he stared out of the window. A watery redness had seeped into his eyes. "I remember him telling me that he'd been threatened by a couple of thugs one night, guys he'd seen hanging round the cafe near Meek's flat. I just thought it was another one of his stories, even after he was killed. There was nothing to suggest that the accident had been anything *but* an accident.

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"But then a year or so later, when I'd been seeing Meg for a couple of months, Meek's assistant, Johnny Wood, asked me why I was still working, why didn't I just get hitched to your mum and retire. When I asked him what he meant, he said something about Greg having been sacrificed for her benefit."

"'Sacrificed for her benefit.' You know what he meant by that?"

Jackson shook his head.

"Did you ask my mother what he may have meant?"

He shook his head again. "She wouldn't talk about it."

"Did my father play on 'Telstar'? Is that what this guy Wood meant, do you think?"

Jackson looked at me with a puzzled expression on his face. "Your father was killed before 'Telstar' was recorded," he said.

"Yes, of course," I said, the words drifting away from me.

My head was beginning to feel a little foggy and I suggested we take a walk along the beach and for a couple of hours he chatted about the early days of the British pop scene. Time had dulled his memory and there was only real feeling in his voice when he spoke of his old friends.

I could smell salt on the air and the rhythm of the surf breaking on the pebble beach had a calming and refreshing effect on me. I felt at ease for the first time since my mother's death.

As we walked back along the pathway and stopped in front of his chalet, Jackson said, "Greg was a ruthless man and a great user of people. He used your mother, dumped her the minute he heard she was pregnant. But he didn't deserve to die." He looked out across the flat grey expanse of the sea, his face heavy with a sadness that had been buried for a long time. "He was a good friend to me."

I drove home with the feeling that at last my father was becoming a real person, with flesh and blood and hopes and ambitions and a mean streak as wide as it was long.

I was still no nearer to finding the truth about 'Telstar,' but Jackson had told me that Johnny Wood still lived at the flat in Holloway Road.

The following morning I stood outside the bike shop looking up at the windows on either side of the blue plaque. It was almost eleven and the blinds were still drawn. I rang the bell and waited.

The features on Wood's large face were bunched close together and large patches of tired skin reflected the dull light emanating from the naked bulb hanging from the ceiling of the hallway. Strands of brittle grey hair covered his scalp.

He closed his eyes and nodded as I introduced myself, as if he had been expecting me. He turned and I followed him up the stairs.

I refused the offer of a drink and sat on the edge of the sofa and waited for him to speak.

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"I first met your father back in January sixty-one," he began, a new energy in his eyes. "He was just a kid—nineteen, twenty—and like every other kid who came around he wanted to be a star. Joe used to let some of 'em hang around, helping out, running errands, that sort of thing. Good-looking kids, Joe always had good-looking kids hanging around, especially if they didn't mind staying over." He raised his eyebrows and looked at me knowingly. "Greg could sing a little, he even played on a couple of records, I think. He was never gonna be a star, but he kept on pestering Joe to let him make a record.

"One morning, right out of the blue, Joe tells me he's gonna let Greg do 'Walk Her Home' with The Tornados backing him. I think Greg must've stayed over the night before . . ." Wood paused to light a cigarette and let the full meaning of his words sink in; I let his words hang in the air. "Told me to call in the guys, we were gonna do it that afternoon. Anyhow, a couple of hours later, Joe changed his mind, told me to scrap it."

"Greg was furious. He came around late that night smashed out of his head. It was around ten, and I was in the kitchen recording some overdubs with Joe, who was in the living room. The two of them got into this huge argument, a fight—I could hear it all through the speakers in the kitchen—and Joe hit him over the head with a guitar. I heard this awful scream and ran into the living room, but Greg was already dead, just lying there with his head in this pool of blood. Joe was standing over him with the guitar still in his hand. Next thing I knew, Meg was in the room—she'd been staying with Mrs. Harvey downstairs since Greg had walked out on her—pushing everyone around. She sent me out to the kitchen and told me to sit tight, and I just sat there shaking; I was shaking so much I could hardly light a cigarette.

"I went home a little later and when I turned up the next morning Joe was sitting in the living room just staring at the spot where Greg had fallen. He'd been up all night and his eyes were sunk deep in his face. He told me that they'd bundled Greg into the boot of his car and gone and dumped him in the road up behind The Rainbow someplace. Made it look like an accident." He pulled on the cigarette. "And then your mother asked me for a copy of the tape."

"The tape?" I said.

"Yeah, the tape. I'd left the machine running and got the whole thing down on tape."

I remembered the tape I had found in my mother's house. "You still have a copy?"

He shook his head.

It now seemed pointless asking whether or not my father had played on "Telstar"; the royalties had obviously been the payoff.

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"You know what happened after that?"

"Joe never mentioned it again. I think he went to the funeral, though."

"And you have no doubt that she was blackmailing him?"

"Joe was always getting blackmailed; he said it was the curse of the famous queer. I think he just dealt with it the same way he did any other threat—he paid up and hoped that she wouldn't come back for more."

A pained expression of satisfaction came over Wood's face and I had the feeling that he had been waiting in the flat for nearly forty years to tell me the story.

Over the next few days I tried desperately to hold on to the image I had of my mother. But it seemed that the more I learned about my father, the closer I came to knowing him, the further she slipped away, drifted into an alien darkness; the rasping angel of my childhood had become a dark and vengeful siren.

I had no intention of going to the police, and I had no problem in reconciling myself to the money. Theoretically, it belonged to my father, and whatever reservations I may have harboured about it being blood money soon dissolved when I told myself that because my mother had taken herself out of the loop (by creating the trust fund) it was a legitimate inheritance.

My acceptance of the money was also the acceptance of my father the star and his posthumous number-one record.

The beautiful irony of this did not strike me until a couple of months later. Nancy and I had stolen an early summer break from the kids and were enjoying a weekend in Brighton. Browsing among the junk shops in the Lanes on the Sunday morning, I came across an old tape recorder and I immediately thought of the reel of tape that I had found in my mother's house. After my meeting with Johnny Wood, I had tried to forget about the tape but a primal curiosity got the better of me and I put down two crisp five-pound notes on the glass counter and walked out of the shop with the tape recorder under my arm.

As soon as I got home I dug the shoebox containing the reel of tape out of the attic and set up the equipment. The tape had faded over the years and there was a persistent hiss, but it was still possible to make out what was happening.

I listened with calm detachment as the sound of two men arguing broke into violence, cries of pain riding a backbeat of flesh being struck. And then there it was, the final heart-wrenching scream of my father as the killing blow of the guitar connected with his head.

But it was the realisation that the cry was exactly the same cry that rode the fadeout of "Telstar" that brought the cold smile to my lips. ●

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Art by Allen Davis

THE FLOWER DIET

by James Powell

San Sebastiano's great giraffe mania of 1842 began with the gift of a pair of those fine animals to the Mediterranean principality by the King of the Belgians. The public flocked to see Anatole and Natalie roaming the St. Felix zoo like lofty citadels, their living quarters decked out with blue bunting cabbages and pink bunting roses, twin symbols of the little nation. (In San Sebastiano's charming folklore its first baby citizen had been found inside a cabbage, its first citizeness inside a rose.)

For the next three years everything was giraffe: Canes and umbrellas sported giraffe-head handles, stuffed giraffes crowded toy shelves, giraffe-patterned cravats and giraffe-horn tiaras became the style. Of the innumerable giraffe songs only "Love in the Clouds" has come down to us with its memorable refrain, "Our romance remains aloof/Though we're dancing hoof to hoof."

Even young Ambrose Ganelon, the stocky little founder of the detective agency which today still bears his name, owned a papier-mâché pocket case for his oboe reeds in the shape of a giraffe.

So when Deodat Cavelli and his cost-cutting followers formed a

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government pledged to making a little go a long way, was it any wonder they were dubbed Giraffists?

In those days, Ganelon hadn't yet gained the prosperity which would make him the sometime prisoner of his armchair from the gout, dependent on a cadre of agents acting as his legs and eyes. Back then he lived in a small, slant-roofed garret at 18 bis rue Blondin, where the landlord's generous daughter, an excellent cook, had taken a fancy to him.

James Powell's stories always contain elements of fact. In this instance he kindly told us what they are: "The Perkins Steam Machine-gun did exist. When the British military rejected it as impractical, the inventor exhibited it as a novelty ... The apollonicon organ and the ascending room were also novelties in London at the time ... the Bramah lock was a wonder of its time and only proven to be pickable around 1870." †

Ganelon never left home without a thorough reading of the morning newspapers, a habit from his penniless university days when he solved crimes from newspaper accounts, selling his findings to Nathan Medocq, then Assistant Prefect of Police. So it was that in the spring of 1845 in the *Factotum du Matin* he saw a small notice that Luiz Falcoa, a Portuguese merchant, late of Venice, invited those of the public interested in curiosa to visit his establishment, the Shop of Far-Fetched Things, on the rue Vanesse.

At the time, Ganelon merely wondered why anyone would choose such a run-down part of the waterfront to set up shop. But a month later, in the gossipy little *Miroir des Boulevards,* the columnist "Flaneur" described something as so preposterous it reminded him of Monsieur Falcoa, the one-eyed shopkeeper in the rue Vanesse, who claimed he could sell his wares cheaply because he knew the alchemists' secret of living on the odor of flowers. Now why, Ganelon asked himself, would a man claim such an absurdity? Before turning the page, he marked this Falcoa down as someone in need of watching.

Meanwhile, under Cavelli and the Giraffists the economy stagnated. Factory workers were laid off or saw their wages reduced by ten percent. A crop failure drove up the price of bread.

Perhaps the journalists turned to Falcoa as a relief from such dreary news. The shopkeeper told them he had learned his useful secret during a buying trip to Trebizond on the Black Sea. Among the passengers on the voyage out was one whose absence at meals Falcoa attributed to seasickness. Later, when they struck up a friendship, the man sniffed his boutonniere and confessed his membership in the Rosicrucian brotherhood that had rediscovered the ancient diet of flowers.

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Their first night in Trebizond, Falcoa's friend fell so violently ill the hotel doctor despaired for his life. Having read somewhere of the upas rhododendron of Trebizond, whose nectar held a strychnine-like poison rendering the honey made from it deadly to man, Falcoa wondered if its perfume might be equally fatal to one who fed on the odor of flowers. He immediately chartered a swift ship to carry them far from the place. But death overtook the craft. Before expiring, Falcoa's grateful friend pressed into his hand a crumbling pamphlet on the Flower Diet saved from his Rosicrucian novitiate days.

Ganelon put down the newspaper, wrote "Trebizondian honey?" on his cuff, and frowned at the words.

In follow-up stories, the celebrated explorer Polydor Briant spoke of an ancient tribe at the source of the Ganges who had no mouths but lived on odors—flowers, mostly, or perhaps an apple before a long voyage—while Baron von Klemm, dean of the diplomatic corps, remembered an immensely fat king of Siam who fed entirely on the vast lies his courtiers told him, and Cardinal Jussot pointed to the holy woman in Germany who took no food but her daily communion wafer.

The ever-curious Prince Conrad was the first to invite Falcoa to dinner. That is to say, while the royal family ate, Falcoa now and then smelled the single red rose on his plate and touched his napkin to his lips. Afterwards, he endeared himself to the royal children with stories of his adventures in far-off Canada, a land doomed many times over because it had been built on a vast snowman graveyard.

Soon Falcoa was taken up by fashionable hostesses and would sit smiling while the table fed and stared. Once he was asked if his odd diet hadn't cost him the sight of an eye. Falcoa blamed his eye patch on an accident, insisting he had never been sick a day since learning to live on flowers.

Later, speaking before the Culture and Agriculture Society, known popularly as the Poet and Peasant Club, Falcoa told his audience, "Feed as animals do and you nourish the body. But the nose is the mouth of the soul." When the painter Marbeuf rose to ask if he could teach others to feed ethereally, too, Falcoa shook his head. "Society is not yet ready for the Flower Diet," he replied.

The next morning, Ganelon looked up from the newspaper account of the speech with a furrowed brow. If Falcoa wasn't setting himself up as a teacher, what *was* the man after? He certainly wasn't in it for the free dinners.

The rue Vanesse was a short, dismal street smelling of bilges, rotting rope, and stale fish. Warehouses shouldered their smaller neighbors aside and shouted down the tiny shop signs with names ten feet tall. Drays filled with bales, hogsheads, sacks, immense

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baskets and boxes crammed the street. Here and there an alleyway gave Ganelon a glimpse of the ship-filled harbor, a mass of masts, spars, and rigging. Commerce streamed around him on all sides. The noise was deafening, horses' hooves and harness, wagon wheels on cobbles, the draymen's cry.

Falcoa's shop occupied the ground floor of a narrow three-story building, its front door well strapped with iron, the small shop window heavily barred. Ganelon instinctively looked upward and found the bell hanging beneath the pitch of the roof. A few old buildings like this still remained in the principality. In their time they had been banking houses, the external doors and windows wired up to machinery in the garret. Any attempt at forced entry would have set that alarm bell ringing.

Ganelon stepped through the front door and into a small hallway. A narrow staircase curved upwards. Beneath it, a second door led into the Shop of Far-Fetched Things. If Falcoa sought notoriety to promote his business, he had failed. The place was empty, no fanciers of curiosa, no debt-ridden heir come to buy Trebizondian honey for a wealthy aunt with the sweet tooth; indeed, no honey pots.

After the crush of commerce outside, the shop seemed quiet as a chapel. Indeed, one wall of shelves held statues of alien gods and goddesses. But then, as if to cancel them out, another held alien devils and demons. Ganelon looked around. Those carved boxes and urns there offered many hiding places for ship's biscuits and hard sausage. But if they did, they wouldn't be left unattended.

Here Falcoa entered through the shop door, a fragile, bookish-looking man, his pallor enhanced by the black eye patch, carrying an ivory stirrup cup bound around with silver. "Forgive me, sir. I was up in my workshop making a small repair." Shyly he offered the cup for examination.

"Narwhal?" asked Ganelon. "Russian ivory?"

"Unicorn, sir," insisted Falcoa quietly. "Which has the power to purify a poisoned cup." He lay the object across two wall brackets above a table which bore a porcelain goblet on an ormolu base.

"Griffin's egg?" asked Ganelon.

The shopkeeper brightened. "The gentleman is a connoisseur?"

"My name is Ambrose Ganelon. I am a detective of the unofficial sort."

"How may I help you?"

Before answering, Ganelon took up several discreet price tags. "You sell the fabulous for knock-down prices."

"It is the age which holds them cheap, sir. I confess I have little head for business. But I am a patient man. I trust in human nature. Things change." He spoke as if these words gave him no pleasure.

"Then how convenient you don't eat."

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"Ah, you've heard of that," smiled Falcoa. "Yes, the very air around us is rich with nourishment if we but know how to harvest it."

He might have continued in this vein but Ganelon interrupted him. "I hope, Monsieur Falcoa, you haven't come among us to fish in troubled waters."

"I admit I sometimes feel like the owl, which, some say, soon turns any place it dwells into a ruin."

"Please remember, I dwell here, too," cautioned Ganelon. "I'll have my eye on you."

"Yet the hand is quicker than the eye," replied Falcoa and, making a magician's pass, he reached behind Ganelon's ear. But instead of a coin, a pure white dove, or the ace of spades, the hand came back empty.

The two men exchanged bows as if they understood each other.

Telling himself that the shop's most far-fetched thing was Falcoa's nose, Ganelon returned to the street. He also noted a man in a doorway across the way dressed in that peculiar shade of black only police agents wear.

Ganelon was at his oboe that evening when he heard a step on the garret staircase, then a knock. He opened the door to find Prefect of Police Nathan Medocq.

A thin, sharp-elbowed, and smiling man, Medocq seemed all spine and teeth, like a sinister pocket comb. He had a large spice of the scoundrel in him. Most recently, when Giraffist economies obliged the secret police cadets to furnish their own disguises, he let it be known that those who wished to graduate must buy their beards from him. Reportedly it was quite a sight when the cadets paraded in for their diplomas wearing identical bright red, waist-length beards.

Invited inside, Medocq surveyed the room with a quick glance and used his walking stick to push aside the curtain which hid Ganelon's bed and washstand and to peek under the cushion on the offered chair. "You paid a visit to Monsieur Luiz Falcoa today. Why?"

"Why not?"

The pocket comb bristled. Then it shrugged and settled back in the chair. "All right, I have his house watched. I have him followed, hoping he'll lead me to some nest of conspirators. I've had the man under surveillance since he stepped ashore carrying Parma violets."

Ganelon understood. Napoleon said he would return from Elba with the spring violets. His people adopted the flower and wore the color as a show of faith in his promise. Medocq and his reactionary friends hated the dead emperor's followers most of all.

"I even ordered his place searched while he was out on one of his evening walks," admitted Medocq. His look turned sheepish. "The front-door lock was one of those damned new unpickable

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Bramahs. So my men tried to force a second-floor window and set off the old alarm bell. What a row with the uniformed police before they could identify themselves!"

Ganelon expressed amazement the alarm system still worked.

"Two years ago a sea captain named Jacobi bought the building and spent the time between his last few voyages before retirement restoring the wiring and oiling up the gears. Machinery's his hobby. He occupies the third floor."

Medocq laid a finger alongside his nose and renewed his smile. "Scratch a sea captain, find a smuggler, as the saying goes. So I hinted to Jacobi that certain pending charges might be overlooked for his cooperation.

"The next evening my search team was waiting in the next street when Falcoa passed by at the start of his walk. Jacobi had left the front door unlocked for them. They combed the shop and upstairs living quarters and found nothing of an incriminating nature. By then his Flower Diet was all over the newspapers. So I had my men look into that, too. Nothing. No food, not a crumb. Not a fork, not a spoon. Not a pot. The man doesn't eat."

"He eats," insisted Ganelon.

"You think it's some kind of confidence game? I suppose. Hardly a matter for our underfunded secret police, then. Still, I'd like to keep an eye on him."

"Tell me about his nightly walks," asked Ganelon.

"He walks. He stops nowhere and speaks to no one." Medocq thought for a moment and laughed. "Perhaps he's working up an appetite. On his way back he always buys a bouquet from an old flower woman on the Boulevard Tancredi, inhales deeply thereof, and returns it with a polite bow."

"And what does Venice say?"

"According to them, Falcoa had a small antique shop in the Campo San Bartolommeo. But their report left me with a curious impression. Something tells me that if we ever tried to send Falcoa back, Venice would not take him."

As Ganelon lay in bed that night other matters should have occupied his mind. In three days he would leave for London where, under orders from General Lionel Gaston, the head of San Sebastiano's military intelligence, he was to steal the plans for the Perkins Steam Machine-Gun. Yet he found himself staring up into the angle of darkness pent up beneath the eaves, pondering Falcoa's swindle, wondering when the man would drop the other shoe and what shape that shoe would take.

The next evening, with Medocq's permission, Ganelon waited with two secret-police agents across from the dark shop on the rue Vanesse. Light burned in Falcoa's second-floor windows and in

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Captain Jacobi's above them.

Then Falcoa's light went out and a minute later the shopkeeper appeared at the front door, which he locked behind him before he started down the street.

Ganelon and an agent who wore the faded remains of a black eye from the botched break-in attempt followed after him. This most unprofitable walk went just as Medocq said. In an hour or so, they were back in the rue Vanesse.

Falcoa unlocked the door and disappeared inside the building. Ganelon and his companion rejoined the other agent across the street. The light came on in Falcoa's rooms. After a few minutes a dimmer light replaced it.

"Settling in for the night," said the agent with the black eye. "He reads in bed by candlelight. No leaving a warm bed to turn out the gas. I pull that trick myself. In a half-hour or so he'll blow out the candle and go to sleep."

Ten minutes later, the third-floor windows went dark. Then the front door opened again and a bearded man in a peaked cap whom the agent identified as Captain Jacobi came out and walked away down the street with a rolling sea-dog's gait.

After half an hour, Falcoa's candle went out, leaving the building in darkness.

The next evening, the other police agent took his turn following Falcoa on his walk. The agent with the black eye led Ganelon across the street and through the front door. "Jacobi never lets us down," he said. Upstairs, the man picked the simple lock on Falcoa's door, lit the gas, and followed Ganelon, watching with obvious satisfaction as the detective examined both rooms without finding anything remarkable.

A copy of *The Count of Monte Cristo* lay on a small table beside the bed next to a candlestick and matches. At a table in the middle of the room, Falcoa had been repairing a marquetry box with damaged inlay. Among the glue pots, brushes, chisels, and other small tools, Ganelon picked up a small bottle filled with a clear, odorless liquid with a glass eyedropper for a stopper. Before he could taste it, the agent laughed. "It isn't soup, you know. Just water."

Ganelon reached over and picked up an awl from among the tools. He drew a fingertip along the spike and rubbed it across the ball of his thumb. Surveying the room once more, he indicated he'd seen enough.

They went back to their post across the street. When Falcoa returned from his walk, the other agent joined them. Events proceeded as the night before. But this time when Jacobi appeared and headed off down the street, Ganelon followed him.

The sea captain led him to the theater district and the crowded

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Café du Trac. Watching from outside, Ganelon saw Jacobi join a younger, clean-shaven man of good-natured appearance sitting at a table, his back to the wall. A fan of vaudeville, Ganelon recognized a number of performers still in their makeup at the surrounding tables, come to eat and drink before the evening's final performance.

Jacobi and his companion mixed a hearty meal with animated conversation. At the end, the sea captain rose, leaned over, and gave the young man a kiss on the cheek. The young man protested and rubbed his cheek. Smiling, Jacobi left the restaurant and headed back the way he had come.

Ganelon decided he might learn more by following the sea captain's dinner companion. So he took up his position across the street beside an advertising kiosk. As he waited, he noted that Victor the Human Goat was among the acts at the Theatre du Poche. Victor, a mournful, long-faced Hungarian, came on stage with a gunny sack filled with rocks and broken glass which he ate one after another with a cold appetite, devouring the gunny sack for dessert. Ganelon wondered what Victor would think of the Flower Diet.

Time passed, but the young man did not come out. When at last Ganelon started back inside, he was met by the rush of vaudevillians hurrying back for the final show. Ganelon stood aside, scanning faces as they passed. Last to come was the singer Marie Jardin who had made "Love in the Clouds" a sensation, accompanied by a boy with an awkward walk in rain cape and soft cap.

Ganelon searched the café but his prey had eluded him, perhaps through a side door. On his way home, the detective reconsidered the strange ending to the dinner. Had the young man been protesting the kiss, or was it the beard?

Ganelon arrived in London expecting the theft of the Perkins Steam Machine-Gun plans to be a simple matter. After all, he had access everywhere, the British government still considering itself in his debt. In 1839, Ganelon's arch rival, the evil genius Dr. Ludwig Fong, had kidnapped the young Queen Victoria and substituted in her place his niece Abigail, a look-alike from the English branch of the Fong clan.

A suspicious Lord Melbourne had asked Ganelon to investigate. The detective uncovered the substitution, traced the English monarch to the slave pens of far-off Timbuktu, and rescued her, frustrating Fong's plan to sell Victoria on the most perverse corner of the slave bazaar, where short English virgins were highly prized.

Those three weeks alone drifting down the Niger in an Arab dhow had been the happiest of Ganelon's life and, if he was to believe her, of Victoria's as well. Her later marriage to Albert of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha had shaken him profoundly. Had he known the Perkins plan was in a red dispatch box kept in the royal bedroom in Windsor

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Castle, Ganelon might well have refused his assignment.

The day of his arrival, Ganelon read that Prince Albert was in Liverpool dedicating a railway station. So he was not surprised that evening when a royal equerry arrived at his hotel. Ganelon traveled by closed carriage to Windsor, down a familiar secret passage, and into the arms of the woman he still loved.

He left at dawn with the Perkins plans, which he passed on to a discreet but slow copyist. Victoria would have to find other distant buildings for Albert to dedicate. This she did. But the day finally came when the original plans could be restored to the dispatch box. Despite Victoria's tears and pledges of love, Ganelon said goodbye, vowing to put her from his mind and heart forever.

During a turbulent channel crossing, Ganelon vowed many other things, including a pledge of celibacy. Indeed, with seasick logic, he pledged to father a line of celibate detectives to fight crime as the Teutonic knights of old battled the gods of the pagan forest. From Calais, Ganelon returned on wings of steam to San Sebastiano.

The money from the delivery of the Perkins plans allowed Ganelon to dine out of an evening at Chez Catulle, his favorite restaurant, and avoid, at least for the moment, coming under further obligation to his landlord's daughter, whose heart had grown fonder during his absence.

While Ganelon was in London, Medocq had staged a fake attempt to abduct Falcoa, implicating the secret service of San Sebastiano's principal rival, Sardinia. Then, by arguing Falcoa's need for protection, Medocq shifted the burden of the man's surveillance onto the general police budget. The two uniformed policemen with plumed hats and swords who now accompanied the shopkeeper about on his evening walks gave Falcoa the appearance of a national treasure. Polite applause often followed in his wake.

Not long after Ganelon's return, San Sebastiano's artistic crowd began carrying flowers about with them and scorned food. Eating, or at least eating in public, came to be thought vulgar. Among the toughs lounging on the street corners in the Duranceville district around the prison, the toothpick was no longer the touchstone of elegance. Some restaurants survived by serving Falcoa-salads of edible flowers, radishes carved to resemble roses, and carrot daisies.

Chez Catulle, Ganelon discovered, had taken its first small steps toward transforming itself into a bookstore. The large tasseled menus, relics of the great tassel craze of 1831 when everything from men's boot tops to fezzes were so ornamented, were replaced by thick octavo volumes presented to you by waiters with the wolfish look of literary critics who did not take your order so much as parse it.

In the following weeks, sizeable noses became a sign of beauty and depth of soul. Snorting and flaring nostrils crowded popular roman-

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tic fiction. Indeed, so many women with tiny, upturned noses despaired of marriage that a convent was given over to them on the site of the present parking garage on the rue des Soeurs Retroussés.

Of course, charlatans appeared hawking flower-nourishment schemes. Falcoa denounced them all, and if his name was used, took legal action. The most successful was Professor Dorhner's Apple Regimen School. For nine weeks his students ate nothing but a daily apple, the kind diminishing in size from large costard to tiniest crab. In week ten, they dined on apple blossoms. Afterward, Dorhner promised, they would thrive on the scent of flowers alone or their tuition would be refunded. The apple trees had just come into bud when the professor absconded with everyone's money.

At the close of Falcoa's first year in San Sebastiano the sluggish economy brought down the Giraffists, replacing them with a coalition, The Cabbage Rose Front under Eustache Novare, which tried to distract the population with military parades, band concerts in the park, and anti-Sardinian rhetoric.

Amid talk of war, Ganelon heard stories Falcoa had sold the army his Flower Diet and that secret production of the Perkins Steam Machine-Gun had begun in earnest. The second rumor surprised him most, for he had General Gaston's guarantee the weapon would only be used defensively.

Putting a certain message in the personal column of a certain evening newspaper, Ganelon was waiting on a certain park bench at noon the next day when General Gaston arrived at a brisk march, uniform and all, and sat down beside him. With a cavalry officer's innocence, Gaston felt all he had to do to assume a disguise was dismount and remove his spurs. Ganelon knew the man would be hurt unless they talked staring straight ahead and moving their lips as little as possible. So he did.

"Yes, we offered Falcoa a considerable sum for the Flower Diet," admitted Gaston. "Think of it, Ambrose, an army that didn't have to travel on its stomach!"

"Falcoa eats," insisted Ganelon.

"Well, no matter. The man refused to sell. Swore never to let it be put to military use." Gaston gave a prideful chuckle. "So here's what I did. During spring maneuvers, I had our soldiers spindle pippins on the spikes of their helmets. Our finny friends the Sardinians fell for it. They think we march to the Falcoa quickstep unencumbered by a plodding commissariat."

"And how do you know that?"

"They stockpile essence of upas-rhododendron oil and experiment with converting it into a gas. They mean to strike first, parading ashore behind a cloud they believe will destroy our army. Our Perkins Steam Machine-Guns firing from defensive

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positions will cut them to ribbons on the beaches." He wagged a triumphant finger over the word "defensive."

Ganelon stopped at the small café just outside the park gate, called for the afternoon newspapers and a glass of wine, and mused on how easily a useful fantasy can become reality. But his main question remained unanswered: What was in all this for Falcoa? The waiter returned and departed. Ganelon took a sip of wine and opened the first newspaper.

The Theatre du Poche's announcement of the return engagement by popular demand of that master marksman Monsieur Nano Gigante in his acclaimed role as the Musical Spider set Ganelon thinking how, even in tumultuous times, the public must be entertained. Then he paused. Hadn't the Musical Spider been on the same bill with Victor the Human Goat on the poster kiosk across from the Café du Trac? Coincidence enough to take him to the theater for the last show of the evening.

The candy-striped wallpaper and the sparkling gaseliers lent an element of fairyland to the crowded scene which the smell of orange peel and humanity struggled to contradict.

Spotting Captain Jacobi a few rows ahead of him, Ganelon decided he had been right to come. He sat through the contortions of the India-Rubber Family, a humorous recitation by a man in a farmer's smock, and the yapping of Yolanda and Her Dancing Dogs.

Finally a drum roll sounded and a flash of light and a loud *bang!* turned all eyes toward the topmost gallery at the back of the theater. The Musical Spider emerged from a cloud of smoke, a fantastic creature with eight furry legs, a papier-mâché head, bulging goblin eyes, and an iridescent jacket of greens, blues, and silver as though tailored from the skins of its fly victims. Too small to be a man, and too vigorous and threatening to be a child, the thing scampered out onto a web of wires stretched high above the audience.

On stage, the curtain parted to reveal a beam hung with sixteen bull's-eye targets. Now the creature unslung a rifle equipped with a drum magazine and began firing at the targets. Each bull's-eye made a silver bell ring. The tune he played was "Love in the Clouds." He played it again. But now a magic lantern threw the lyrics onto a scrim at the back of the stage. The audience began to sing along with the shots and bells.

Fresh magazines from the bandoleer across his chest allowed the Musical Spider to pick out other songs of the day, shooting over his shoulder using a pocket mirror, or blindfolded, or twirling in midair by his teeth. The audience joined in more enthusiastically with each song. Only Jacobi, Ganelon noted, sat silently,

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watching this extraordinary marksmanship with a critical eye.

Another drum roll and the Musical Spider swung down across the theater, skimming low over the heads of the audience. How the ladies screamed! Rifle in one hand, the creature fired, making the bells play "The Cabbage and the Rose Entwined," San Sebastiano's tunesome national anthem. The audience leaped to its feet as one, shouting out the lyrics. No need for the magic lantern here. Then, while the theater rang with cheers and calls to invade Sardinia, the Human Spider vanished back up its web.

Back out on the street, Ganelon bought a copy of the *Eclair du Soir* and discovered that on Sunday afternoon next, Luiz Falcoa would give an important lecture on the Flower Diet. He felt quite let down. Was that it? Was that all there was behind this complicated charade, charging people to come and hear you talk? Then Ganelon read further and discovered all proceeds would be donated to the soup kitchen run by the Abbey of the Holy Vernicle. Devil take the man!

When Sunday came, Ganelon, clutching a ticket sold to him by a shy monk in the lobby box office of the new Palais Polytechnique, took the famous ascending glass room which carried visitors from the ground floor Cave of Stalactites and Stalagmites display through the sputter and crack of the World of Electricity exhibits and up past the ingenious revolving cyclorama representing the Battle of the Cloaca Maxima when, during the Revolt of the Gondoliers in 1498, the gondola armada sheltered deep in the great sewer system beneath San Sebastiano was surprised and blown to kindling by Admiral Chapeau's galley fleet, which the wily old salt had equipped with shortened oars. When the great Apollonicon organ boomed out the battle's final cannonade, the whole building shook.

The auditorium was crowded. Falcoa began with a description of how the Flower Diet had come into his hands and changed his life. Then he spoke of the health advantages of living on the odor of flowers. By neither eating nor drinking, he insisted, man closes the door on disease. As for fluids, he added, they are easily obtained in a purified form through our pores, which he called "the skin's thousand tiny noses."

He spoke of the sinus passageways, that labyrinth where the Bull of Corpulence dwells, blocking flower nourishment from reaching soul and body. But this Bull, he told them, could be slain by inhaling a concoction of common chemicals, after which certain breathing exercises could reopen the sinuses to flower traffic.

At last he said, "I have traveled much, seen man at his very worst, and judged him not yet ready for the Flower Diet. But I have been deeply touched by the way you, the generous people of

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San Sebastiano, have welcomed me into your midst. In gratitude, I would like to make you a gift of the Flower Diet. I am ready to lead you all through the sinus labyrinth and teach you the secret chemical formula so that you may all slay your Bull of Corpulence.

"But I must warn you. You will need a well-considered and orderly plan if you are going to introduce the Flower Diet into your lives. I urge you to discuss it among yourselves. Once you have your plan, we can begin."

But Falcoa's final warning was lost in the next day's flurry of newspaper articles on San Sebastiano's happy future when the time and money spent on shopping, cooking, and eating would go instead for high-minded self-improvement.

That same afternoon three new companies to market the Flower Diet were traded on the Bourse, with schemes to buy it outright from Falcoa or with shares and royalties.

At a torch-lit rally that night, Paladins of Labor orators proclaimed the dawning of a golden age when factory owners no longer held the whip of starvation over the workers' heads. The next day, the owners claimed their own share of the Falcoa windfall by reducing wages another ten percent. Workers took to the streets in angry demonstrations.

Now land values plummeted, for how could flower-growing farmers stop people from flocking to the countryside at mealtime to gorge themselves downwind for free? Landowners called for laws to ban flower beds in public parks, to tax window boxes and require nose-restraining devices within 500 meters of flowers on private property. When the three Flower Diet companies merged, the Bourse went wild as people invested in the Consolidated Fragrances and secondary stocks like Excelsior Nose Fetters and the House of Greenhouses.

Amid the buying frenzy, Falcoa announced that he would never allow the Flower Diet to be sold. The stock market plummeted. Land values inched nervously upward.

Through all this to-and-fro, Ganelon walked the city wearing a baffled expression, shocking himself whenever he saw his reflection in a shop window. He had accused Falcoa of fishing in troubled waters; now he didn't know if the shopkeeper was fisherman, fish, water, or bait.

San Sebastiano didn't come to its senses until landlords tried to anticipate a future without kitchens or dining rooms by classifying each a bedroom and raising rents accordingly. Suddenly everyone remembered Falcoa's warning about the need for a planned and orderly transition to the Flower Diet economy. The debate began.

First Cavelli, the Giraffist leader, proposed that each year a tenth of the citizenry be chosen by lottery to learn the Flower Diet

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on the basis of one-man, one-chance. Outraged women stormed his house. From a window under the eaves Cavelli insisted that by "man" he meant woman, too, because, he smiled and told them, "Man embraces woman." Though not as old a joke then as it is today, it was old enough. The hellcat mob broke down his front door. Cavelli had to escape over the rooftops.

Next came the "Sinners to the Front of the Line!" people, who argued the most spiritually depraved, like the inmates of Duranceville Prison, ought to be instructed first.

"But aren't we all sinners, each of us in our own humble way?" asked middle-class leaders. "Surely Providence chose to situate one part of society in just the right place to learn the Flower Diet and then pass it along to society's two extremities."

The Paladins of Labor quickly declared it was the workers who had earned first claim to the Flower Diet by the honest sweat of their collective brow.

Meanwhile, on every editorial page someone wondered why this great gift, like all blessings from on high, shouldn't be distributed to the rich first, from whom, in God's good time, it would filter down to the commonality much as the deity provides for even the lowliest sparrow by feeding the mighty draught horse.

At Chez Catulle Ganelon cocked a democratic eye at this last image and almost cried out in disgust. Fortunately, a waiter recommending a book appropriate to read with veal to a diner at a nearby table caught the detective's attention and shook his head. Only because of Ganelon's long patronage was he allowed to read newspapers in the "Nonfiction" section of the restaurant where his favorite table now found itself.

Ganelon's spirits lifted when the Cabbage Rose Front's capable Minister of Education proposed that the Flower Diet be taught in the first two grades of elementary school, starting immediately. Here, many agreed, was a plan which could be expanded or restricted as the economy demanded.

But on further consideration, few parents liked the idea of chewing and swilling their way through a meal with flower-sniffing, spiritually superior children looking on.

And so the cry went out, "Sinners to the Front of the Line!" and the circle swung around again.

After a brooding dinner at Chez Catulle, Ganelon decided it was time for the detective and the shopkeeper to lay their cards on the table. He consulted his pocket watch. Falcoa would be on his way back from his walk. Ganelon would confront the man and tell him he knew about his Captain Jacobi identity and the business with the candle, how before he left for dinner he would make a downward-slanting hole with his awl in the side of the candle next to his bed, going as deep as the wick. Into this hole he would insert a few drops

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of water with the eyedropper. Later, when the flame reached the water and went out, anyone watching from the street would assume Falcoa had snuffed out the candle and turned in for the night.

Ganelon would threaten to broadcast Falcoa's deceptions if he didn't explain what he was up to. He would also promise to keep the man's secret if his intentions did not break the law.

While rehearsing all this, Ganelon had been trying to catch the eye of his waiter, whose nose was buried in a book. Finally he hastily threw some money on the table and left.

The streets were crowded. Ganelon remembered the "Sinners to the Front of the Line!" rally in the Parc de la Menagerie that night. He imagined people stepping forward with fervor to claim a place on the Rolls of the Depraved. And the Paladins of Labor were holding a torch-light march. Pointless to try traveling by horse trolley.

So Ganelon walked, passing an eminent doctor whose sandwich board advertised himself as a tree surgeon and a dentist hawking flavored gum for chewing from a tray emblazoned with the slogan: "Even obsolete teeth need exercise." On every corner, by shifting bonfire light, orators spoke on the Flower Diet question or men argued it among themselves. In every shadow lurked the Copper Fists, hired thugs who carried their wages in rolls of centimes in their fists, waiting for anyone to speak ill of the upper class.

Ganelon reached darker and quieter streets. Moving more quickly now, he could soon smell the harbor. The rue Vanesse was not far. Then he heard a gunshot followed by the rapping of a sword scabbard on the cobbles, a policeman's unmistakable call for assistance.

He arrived at the scene breathless and found Falcoa lying in the street before his shop with a policeman bending over him trying to stem a wound in his shoulder. The policeman recognized Ganelon. "The shot came from that warehouse roof over there," he said. "My partner will have the man for certain. There's only one way down."

Just then the old druggist from around the corner hurried up in felt slippers and a coat thrown on over his nightshirt and took over the wounded man's care. "I sent my boy for the ambulance," he told them.

Ganelon and the policeman stood scanning the dark rooftop until the other policeman shouted down to them. "Lost the bastard. Don't know how. Must've sprouted wings."

By the time the ambulance arrived, Falcoa was conscious and insisting he be allowed to recuperate at home. Only when a messenger from Prince Conrad arrived on horseback with instructions for the ambulance to drive the wounded man to the palace infirmary did Falcoa allow himself to be taken away.

Watching the vehicle trundle off, Ganelon understood Falcoa's reluctance to go to a hospital which offered him no secret opportunity to feed himself. But Prince Conrad's children were his little

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friends. What a game he would make out of them smuggling him food!

Next day, the news of the attempt on Falcoa's life and a rumor that he lay at death's door sent San Sebastiano pouring into the streets in angry crowds which marched off in too many directions for Medocq's police to control. The Sardinian embassy was set afire and its flag, the famous "Silver School and Sea" with its many shining fishes crowded onto a blue background, burned under the ambassador's nose. Workers destroyed the offices of the *Factotum du Matin* and wrecked the type for the late edition, including the editorial entitled "Why the Cream Rises to the Top." Copper Fists broke into the headquarters of the Paladins of Labor, beat up the occupants, and threw them and the furniture out the third-floor windows. The shops of the rue de Rigolo, long a bastion of middle-class style, were looted and burned.

By midmorning the *Admiral Chapeau,* armor-plated sloop and pride of San Sebastiano's navy, anchored in the Old Port and trained its guns on the Duranceville quarter. By noon, General Gaston was trying to maneuver cavalry through the narrow streets. A pall of smoke hung over the city. At the St. Felix Zoo, lofty coughs came from the giraffe house where long-neglected Anatole and Natalie lived.

In midafternoon a sudden tempering of crowd noises in the distance brought Ganelon to his garret window. Then curiosity sent him hurrying downstairs and out into the streets.

Suddenly there was Prince Conrad, riding alone down the Boulevard Tancredi dressed in the uniform and decorations of a Knight of the Order of St. Magnus the Great, his silent tut-tuts quieting the mob. In his wake, the story spread that Falcoa was out of danger and would be recuperating as a guest of the palace. When the prince rode back up the boulevard, cheers greeted him from all sides. The crisis had passed.

But the Palais Polytechnique was burning. Everyone flocked to see the fire, even the crew of the *Admiral Chapeau.* The fire brigade worked only to contain the flames. The building and its neo-contemporary style had never been popular. Too many remembered the fine old quarter demolished to make way for it. When at last, in the early evening hours, the floor under the giant Apollonicon organ collapsed, sending the instrument thundering down deep into the inferno, people gave out a happy roar as if a burden had been lifted from their souls. Then, slowly, the crowd dispersed.

Late that night, as he walked the smoky streets, Ganelon noted lights in the palace windows, as if the prince and his council of state were still at work. As he watched the traffic through the postern gate he recognized, among others, the chestnut team of

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the city's largest brewer and the dashing barouche of the president of the Bourse.

One morning a week later, Ganelon was strolling near the docks when he noticed ahead of him a man with a bright red, waist-length beard and Captain Jacobi's sea-dog walk. After buying an apple from a peddler's cart, the man turned off onto the rue Vanesse, polishing his purchase on the sling that held his left arm secure. He might have bitten into the apple if the detective hadn't just then drawn even with him. Instead he raised the apple to his nose.

"Leaving us, Monsieur Falcoa?" asked Ganelon, adding, "It's a terrible beard."

The shopkeeper turned and recognized the detective. "Yes, it is, isn't it? I'm told I look like a secret-police cadet. It's only till we're out of sight of land. If people thought I was being exiled, they might protest. Too many have already been injured on my behalf."

"But you are not being exiled," said Ganelon as they passed the dark window of the Shop of Far-Fetched Things.

Falcoa shook his beard. "I go willingly and promise never to return. Your grandees and altissimos consider me a disruptive presence. They have purchased my building and shop inventory and added a not-inconsiderable sum to hasten me on my way. They yearn for the quiet days before the Flower Diet." Here Falcoa looked over at the detective. "You knew I only pretended to lock the front door when I took my walks, and about Jacobi and my trick with the candle. You said nothing. Why?"

"To use a phrase of the moment, let's say I couldn't see the giraffe herd for all the legs."

They walked in silence until they reached the small bridge where the left branch of the Cornichon flowed into the Old Port. Instead of crossing over, Falcoa directed his companion down a flight of stone steps to a boat landing.

A young man waited there, seated on a pile of baggage with his back to them, watching the approach of the wherry and its crew from the steamer waiting beyond the harbor entrance. When he heard Falcoa's voice he turned and smiled. Ganelon recognized the young man that Jacobi-Falcoa had kissed in the restaurant.

"May I present my son, Fernando?" said Falcoa. "Or perhaps you know him better as Nano Gigante, the Musical Spider."

Ganelon was startled when the young man slid down from his perch and almost disappeared from sight behind the baggage. Fernando was a dwarf. His upper trunk and body were of normal size, his legs mere stumps. Yet the young man's eyes were frank and his voice a pleasant baritone when he shook Ganelon's hand. Then he set to helping load the wherry.

"And where will you go now?" Ganelon asked Falcoa.

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"Paris, I thought. Perhaps I set my sights too high. But this cracked old pot of mine can't go to the well many more times. And I did promise Fernando's mother he would not have to spend his life performing in public. Unless he wanted to. I haven't enough money yet for that."

Falcoa touched the apple to his eye patch and to his wounded shoulder in a brief salaam. Then he followed his son into the boat and took a seat in the stern. From there he said, "A serious thing for a son to shoot his father, even for an expert marksman who only means to wound. Think of what must go through a son's mind as he takes aim. In Venice, Fernando missed. Fragments from the stone wall beside my head cost me an eye. But here he shot true."

As the wherry pushed off from the landing, Ganelon asked, "And in Paris, will it be the Flower Diet again?"

"No, that will have preceded me. I must use another name, tell another story. I'm not sure what. I will feel my way for a year or so. Perhaps a Frenchman was pointing out my path for me when he wrote: 'Common sense is the most widely shared commodity in the world, for every man is convinced he is well supplied with it.'"

As the distance grew between wharf and wherry, Ganelon thought of something amusing and called out a final, "What did you tell them in Venice, that you walked on water?"

But his smile faltered when the man bowed politely. This time, at least, Ganelon knew he had guessed correctly. ●

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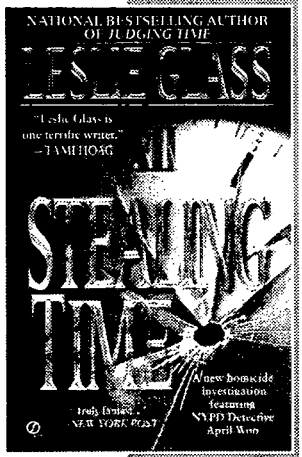

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The Fading Woman

by Edward D. Hoch

Laura Walker first realized she was beginning to fade away the day she chipped one of her front teeth on a piece of bacon in her club sandwich. She called Dr. Frees, her dentist, on her cell phone and arranged to see him the following morning. Then she finished her coffee and was starting back to the office when she remembered she had to cash a small check. The bank in her building had the office account and cashed employees' checks as a courtesy. Laura showed the teller her driver's license and put the money in her wallet. That was when she first noticed the mistake on her license. Her height was given as 5-05 when she'd been 5-07 all of her adult life.

A mistake, certainly. Odd that she hadn't noticed it when she received her new license from the state six months earlier. But it was still her name and her picture, and her eyes were still brown. She'd intended to show Ron the error over dinner that evening, but they got to talking about her broken tooth and she forgot all about it. Ron Walker was an art dealer with a small gallery in a fashionable part of the city. They'd been married just over two years but the gallery was not yet profitable, at least not enough for her to quit her job at Rowland Fabrics and work with him there.

"I hate this eternal struggle for money," she'd told him recently.

"Don't worry," he replied, flashing the smile that had captivated her the first time they'd met. "There are better days coming. All I need is one good break."

Laura had to admit she enjoyed the glamour of the gallery openings, when the artist and his friends arrived to mingle with some of the city's social elite. Ron was in his glory then, and she was looking forward to the Roscoe San Blas opening. That was one reason she needed to have her broken tooth tended to as quickly as possible.

Dr. Frees had been her dentist for less than a year. Her old one had retired, and she hadn't cared for the man who took over his business. Ron suggested she try Frees, who'd been his dentist for some years. He was conveniently close to home, located in a single-story professional building only a block from where she did their grocery shopping. A bachelor in his mid thirties, about her age, he'd been friendly enough on her only previous visit.

She'd only been waiting a few minutes when his receptionist,

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Marge, escorted her in. "Get right in the chair, Mrs. Walker. The doctor will be with you in a moment."

He appeared and gave her a pleasant smile. "A pleasure to see you again. What's the trouble?"

"I'm afraid it's not such a pleasure for me," she answered glumly. "I broke a tooth at lunch yesterday and my husband has an opening at his gallery tonight."

She remembered Dr. Frees as being very even-tempered, a friendly man whose calming voice could have made even a root canal seem like a summer picnic. "We'll have you fixed up in no time. I'll give you a temporary crown while we order a permanent one for that tooth." He'd taken her envelope out of the file as he spoke. "That's it, open wide."

Her hands gripped the plastic armrests of the chair, as they always did on visits to the dentist's office. Dr. Frees poked around, frowned, and went back to consult her dental chart. "Do you remember how many cavities you have, Mrs. Walker?"

"I'm not certain. One or two on the top, I think, on both sides. One is a tooth I broke a few years back. The bottoms are fine."

"That's right. Two on each side. But your chart shows four on the upper right, and two on the bottom." He called for his assistant. "Marge, do you know anything about this dental record? It doesn't agree with the patient's mouth."

The attractive young woman, obviously embarrassed, took the tan card in her hand and studied it. Dr. Frees pointed out a couple of things and murmured something under his breath. "I'm so sorry," Marge said. "I can't imagine how that happened. I'll make out a new one right away."

"We had you fading away faster than you are," the dentist said with a laugh. "You've still got a good set of teeth there, and we'll have you all fixed up for tonight."

"Thank you, Doctor."

"Uh, did you have an X-ray taken last time?"

"No. Why?"

"There was one in your folder, but it obviously came from another patient." He smiled reassuringly. "Don't worry, we didn't charge you for it."

"I'm glad of that!"

But when she left the office with her temporary crown firmly in place, she couldn't help remembering what he had said. "We had you fading away faster than you are." What an awful thing to tell a patient! Fading away!

And she thought of the mistake on her driver's license.

The opening was scheduled from six to eight, and Laura went right after work to help her husband with the final arrangements.

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The Walker gallery consisted of two large rooms a few steps down from street level, on the ground floor of an apartment building in a fashionable section of the city. She parked her car in the back and walked around to the entrance on the street side. The two rooms made it possible for Ron to run smaller exhibits simultaneously. However, tonight both rooms were devoted to the paintings of Roscoe San Blas, a Mexican artist whose landscapes were reminiscent of the magical realism of writers like Garcia Marquez and Laura Esquivel.

"Is he here yet?" Laura asked as she hurried down the three steps from the street.

Ron finished straightening a painting and nodded. "He's in the office trying to reach one of his models. She was supposed to be here tonight."

"Which one?"

"Suzie. That's her in the seascape."

It was a vivid depiction of the Baja California coastline, unyielding against the raging Pacific. Roscoe called it *Surf Memories*. At first one didn't even notice the misty suggestion of a nude woman among the waves, perhaps a goddess, perhaps a mermaid. Seeing her now, Laura felt a twinge of recognition. She had seen this woman somewhere before, perhaps at some artists' gathering.

Roscoe San Blas came out of the office to join them. He was a squat man with graying beard and yellow teeth, the vision of a bohemian artist past middle age but refusing to admit it. He wore a partly open shirt to reveal his curly chest hairs and a leather vest decorated with sun signs. "My lovely Laura! How delightful to see you again!"

"Hello, Roscoe." She accepted the customary peck on the cheek. "You're looking well. Congratulations on your opening."

"Thank you. Seeing my paintings displayed like this is a rare treat."

"Is Suzie coming?" Ron asked.

"I'm afraid she's indisposed tonight." He turned toward Laura. "It's a shame. I was hoping you two would finally meet."

Suzie was something of a mystery woman, and though Ron had hinted that she was Roscoe's mistress, the artist never talked about his personal life. On the few occasions when Laura had met him, at gallery openings like this one, there were always others around to ensure that the conversation remained casual.

"We will, one of these days," Laura said.

"Ron has done so much for me. I hope he earns some good commissions off this."

Laura glanced at her husband. "So do I. Sometimes I think we're worth more dead than alive."

As the guests started arriving, Laura went into the office to store her purse, as usual, in the bottom drawer of Ron's desk. Then she

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returned to help greet the arrivals. Most were people she knew from other opening parties, a few were collectors who'd be willing to risk a few thousand on one of Roscoe's paintings. Refreshments were the usual wine and cheese, available on tables in each of the galleries, and Laura picked up a glass of Chardonnay as she walked by.

"Is that you in the picture?" someone asked her.

She turned and recognized Scott Temple, the art critic for the morning newspaper. Ron always invited him to their openings. "Hello, Scott. What, you mean the nude in *Surf Memories?* That's one of Roscoe's regular models. I think her name is Suzie."

"It looks something like you." He smiled. "I mean the face, of course. I never thought about it, but I suppose Suzie does look a bit like you."

Laura walked over and looked again at the painting. Was that why the woman in the painting had seemed so familiar? Was it like looking in a mirror?

"Roscoe San Blas is a masterful artist," Temple continued, once again behind her. "It's as if you're fading right into the painting."

"It's not me," she insisted, turning away. There was that word again. *Fading.*

Fading away.

She finished her wine and went for another glass. Ron broke free from his conversation to join her. "Nice crowd," he said quietly. "And they seem to be buyers."

"I hope so. We can use the commissions." She took a sip of wine and watched Roscoe working the room. In the past, some artists had refused to come to their own openings, but the squat Mexican seemed to know exactly what was expected of him.

Later, Laura was pleased to see Ron attaching Sold signs to a pair of the larger paintings, and then she noticed Roscoe entering the office with Scott Temple. That could only mean an interview for the daily paper, another good sign. Things seemed to be running smoothly. When the artist and the critic emerged from Ron's office she decided it was time for her to make an unobtrusive exit. She could see Ron was busy so she slipped into the office for her purse and went out the back door to her car.

It was gone. The parking space was empty.

Laura glanced around, certain that her memory was playing tricks. She must have parked somewhere else. She circled the lot, checking out the dozen or so cars, but hers was not among them. Her keys were still in the purse, but her car was gone.

Her first impulse was to run back inside and tell Ron, but the show's opening was going so well that she hated to spoil it. She caught her breath and tried to calm down. She had to report the theft to the police. She remembered a pay phone on the next corner, but when she got there she hesitated. Perhaps she should have told

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Ron after all. He had a duplicate key for the car, and there was always the possibility he'd loaned it to someone without telling her. He'd done it once before and they'd ridden home together.

Damn! She should have told him she was leaving. She didn't want to go back inside now. A cruising taxi rounded the corner and she flagged him down, giving her home address. If Ron hadn't loaned the car to anyone they could call the police when he got home.

She reached the house before eight o'clock, and it wasn't surprising that Ron wasn't yet back. The opening reception ran till eight and he was always there late, chatting with prospective buyers and reviewing the evening with the artist. She figured it might be after nine before she saw him.

Actually, it was well after ten before he walked through the front door and saw her sitting there watching television. He stopped dead in his tracks. "My God, Laura! You're alive!"

"What?"

"The police told me you'd been in a terrible accident. I just identified your body at the morgue!"

Laura sat down, hard. "What are you talking about? Someone stole my car. I waited to report it in case you'd loaned it to someone.

Ron shook his head. "I didn't loan it to anyone. You left without telling me and when the car was gone I figured you'd come on home. The police came to the gallery a little before nine and told me of the accident. It's your car, Laura! It was you inside!"

"I'm not dead. I'm very much alive. The car was stolen."

"Then who was in it?"

"I don't know." She reached for the telephone. "But I'd better call the police right now and tell them there's been a terrible mistake."

He grabbed her hand before she could pick up the phone. "Wait a minute! Let's think about this."

"What's there to think about?"

"Six months ago we took out joint life-insurance policies. Remember?"

"A half-million each. How could I forget it? I mentioned to Roscoe just tonight that I think we're worth more dead than alive."

"And we are. You are! Don't you see? I've just come from identifying your body. You're officially dead."

"But who was the woman in the car?"

"What difference does it make? She was a thief, whoever she was."

Laura couldn't quite grasp what he seemed to be saying. "Let me get this straight. You want everyone to think I was killed in that accident so you can collect my life insurance?"

Ron sat down opposite her. "You know some months we live hand to mouth. What if we could move out to the West Coast and make a whole new start?"

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"But the gallery—!"

"With that much money we could open a new gallery, start a new life. Think about it."

"Someone died in my car, Ron. Don't you think her family and friends are going to start looking for her?"

"Give it till morning and see what happens. I'm betting no one will even be reported missing. No one saw you after you left the gallery, did they?"

"Only the taxi driver."

Her husband bit his lip. "They keep a record of destinations. But nobody would have a reason to check on that."

"This is getting crazy! If we don't tell the police that I'm still alive we could be in deep trouble."

"Let's wait till morning," he said again, wrapping his arms around her. On the table next to them, the telephone rang. Laura reached for it instinctively but he grabbed her wrist. "I'll answer it."

His insistence frightened her. "Go ahead," she told him.

"Hello?" he answered softly. Then, "Scott, you've heard the terrible news?" That would be Scott Temple, the art critic. "It's on television? Then you probably know as much as I do. She left the gallery in her car, apparently heading home. The police told me she went off the road and the car caught fire. No one actually saw it happen, but they identified her from her driver's license and the plates. I just got back from identifying the body."

Laura had shriveled into a corner of the sofa, as if even her breathing might be heard over the phone. She realized she was letting this happen, making no effort to silence Ron's lies.

"Thank you for saying that, Scott," her husband said into the phone. "It's comforting at a time like this."

He hung up and turned to face Laura. She tried to read his thoughts, but his face was a bland mask. "It was nice of him to call."

"Nice! Don't you realize what you're doing? You're committing fraud!"

"You're in it with me, my dear. And we're going to bring it off." The phone rang again and he scooped it up. "Roscoe! Yes, it's a terrible thing. I can't believe it myself."

Laura slept hardly at all during that night. She'd been afraid she'd dream of being imprisoned, but instead her single brief sleep period produced a terrifying vision of that flaming auto crash. When she awoke, lying next to this man she thought she knew so well, she was covered with sweat.

"What's the matter?" Ron asked, stirring beside her as she got out of bed.

"I can't sleep."

"What time is it?"

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"Six-thirty." They hadn't gone to bed until nearly one. She'd simply sat there listening to him talk on the phone to assorted friends and a few distant cousins who called after seeing the television news. When she asked what came next, all he would say was that he'd work it out in the morning.

Now it was morning.

Out of long habit she got up, showered, and started fixing breakfast. He followed her into the kitchen and lit a cigarette. She'd rarely seen him smoke at breakfast. "This is what we have to do," he told her. "You have to go into hiding. Do you still have that black wig from the Halloween party?"

"I guess so, somewhere."

"Find it and put it on. You can slip into the back of the van in the garage where no one can see you. I'll drive you out to the airport motel and you can take a room there. They pretty much cater to transient businessmen and no one will recognize you. Keep the wig on when you leave the room. I'll check in with you after the funeral."

"Funeral." The word sent a chill down her spine.

"Just stay cool and everything will be all right." He came up and slipped his arms around her body. "We're going to start a new life, darling, just the two of us."

She could barely speak during breakfast, but afterward she went to her bedroom dresser and dug out the black wig. Covering her sandy hair made her seem like a different person, and she hated it. But she was certain no casual acquaintance would ever recognize her, especially after her death notice had run in the paper. Quickly she gathered up some clothing in an overnight bag and accompanied Ron to the garage.

"I didn't see the paper," she remembered as they drove away from the house. "I should have read about it."

"Don't be morbid. You're still very much alive and that's all that matters."

She had another thought. "How do I pay for my room? I can't use my credit card."

He'd thought of that. "Here's an envelope with five hundred dollars in it. That'll cover a few nights' food and lodging. I'll be out to see you before then. I should stay here until the insurance check arrives, probably in a couple of weeks, and then we can drive to California. I just think it's safer to wait till after the funeral."

Ron dropped her off at the airport motel and gave her a peck on the cheek. "Don't try to call me," he said. "There'll be people around. I'll phone you when I get a chance."

"All right," she answered weakly.

Once inside, she registered without difficulty, paying for the room in advance. On her way to the elevator she glanced in at the

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small restaurant and stopped to buy a morning paper. The story was on the first page of the second section, but thankfully they hadn't run a picture of her. *Woman Killed in One-Car Crash*, the headline read, and went on to report that Laura Walker, 34, wife of gallery owner Ron Walker, had died when her car caught fire after going off the road. She had been attending an exhibition of paintings by Roscoe San Blas at her husband's gallery when she left early and somehow lost control of her car on the way home. The body was badly burned, but her husband had identified her.

Seeing Roscoe's name reminded her of something, but for a moment she couldn't remember what. Then it came to her. Fading away. The girl in Roscoe's painting who looked like her had seemed to be fading away just as Laura imagined herself to be.

What was her name? Suzie. Suzie something, but Laura couldn't remember ever hearing her last name.

She glanced at her watch, making sure it was past nine o'clock, and looked up San Blas's number in the phone book. Then she covered the phone's mouthpiece with a handkerchief to muffle her voice. The artist himself answered, as she knew he would. "Hello?"

"Roscoe San Blas?"

"Yes. Who is this, please?"

"I'm trying to contact one of your models, a woman named Suzie."

"Tell me who this is."

"I want to hire her to pose for me."

"Is this someone I know?"

Laura hesitated, and when she didn't answer he hung up.

She sat there staring at the phone, wondering if she should try calling back. Finally she decided against it. Roscoe was already suspicious. But somehow she had to locate the mysterious Suzie, if only to learn if she was still alive.

Laura stretched out on the bed, trying to think. Almost before she knew it she'd drifted into sleep. It was almost eleven when she awakened, but her mind was clearer, more focused. That art critic, Scott Temple, might know who Suzie was, and she'd never spoken to him on the phone. There was a good chance she could disguise her voice enough to fool him. She looked up the number of the newspaper and called it.

When Scott Temple came on the line she said, in a voice a bit deeper than her natural one, "You won't remember me, Mr. Temple, but I'm Lisa Grant. I do an art column for *Greater Boston Magazine*. I'm trying to contact a model who's posed for the artist Roscoe San Blas."

"I don't remember you, Miss Grant, but I'll be glad to help if I can. Who is it you're looking for?"

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"That's the trouble. I only have her first name, Suzie."

"You must mean Suzie Rawlings. San Blas uses her occasionally."

"Do you have her address or phone number?"

"I guess it's no secret. She's listed with the modeling agencies around town. Just a minute." He returned to the phone and gave her an address on the south side of the city, plus a phone number. Laura thanked him and hung up.

She sat on the edge of the bed, staring at the telephone. She knew she had to call the number, but what if Suzie Rawlings answered? What if she was alive and well?

Or what if she didn't answer?

Laura's mouth was dry. She took a deep breath and dialed the number. It rang five times and she was about to hang up when a woman's voice answered. "Hello?"

"Is this the model Suzie Rawlings?"

There was a brief hesitation at the other end. "What can I do for you?"

"It's about a modeling assignment. My name is Lisa Grant. The critic Scott Temple gave me your number. I'd like to meet you and talk about it."

"Sure."

"Are you free today? I'm in town here at the airport motel. If you could come out here we could discuss it over lunch."

"Sure, I could do that," the woman said. "What time?"

"How's twelve-thirty?"

"Fine. What did you say your name was?"

"Lisa Grant. I'll be in the lobby."

"I'll see you at twelve-thirty, Miss Grant."

Since Suzie Rawlings was obviously alive and well, the body in the car had been someone else. There was no reason at all for Laura to meet with her, except a curiosity to see someone who resembled her. She went downstairs fifteen minutes early, wearing the black wig, and took a seat near the window where she could observe the parking lot. The lobby was all but empty and she knew she'd have no trouble recognizing the woman.

At 12:25 a tall slender woman with red hair entered the lobby and glanced around. Laura paid no attention to her and continued watching the parking lot. After a few moments the woman walked over to her. "Pardon me, are you Lisa Grant?"

"I—yes, I am. Who—?"

"Suzie Rawlings," the woman said, holding out her hand.

"But—" Laura's first reaction was one of confusion. This woman looked nothing like her. Certainly it wasn't the woman in Roscoe's painting. She felt a momentary sense of relief as she shook hands. Perhaps this wasn't as bad as she'd feared.

"What's the matter?" the woman asked, taking a seat next to her.

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"Nothing. It's just that I saw one of Roscoe San Blas's paintings and someone told me the model he used was you."

She blushed a little and avoided Laura's eyes. "I'd better confess. I'm Suzie's roommate, Clare Dollinger. Suzie's away for a few days and I needed the work, so I came in her place."

Laura's mouth had gone dry again. "Where is she, do you know?"

Clare Dollinger squirmed a bit. "Well, not really. She didn't come home last night, but that's not too unusual with Suzie. She'll turn up after a few days."

"All right," Laura managed. "I'm sorry, I've made a mistake. Tell me, what does your roommate look like?" She stood up, preparing to leave.

The Dollinger woman squinted at her. "Well, a little bit like you, actually, only she's shorter and has blond hair."

"Thank you for coming."

"What about the modeling job?"

"It's all off." She hurried away before the woman could ask more questions.

For the rest of the afternoon, Laura sat alone in her hotel room, trying to convince herself that her husband Ron was not a murderer. After all, he'd been at the gallery when the accident occurred. The police had found him there, hadn't they? He couldn't have slipped away without someone noticing. Besides that, her car was already gone from the parking lot when she left the show.

Still, she had little doubt now that the dead woman in her car was Suzie Rawlings, who apparently bore some resemblance to her. And that made the coincidence too great. Why would Suzie steal her car, smash it up, be killed in the crash and identified as her? Why would Ron urge her to go into hiding so they could collect the insurance and move to California? Why indeed, unless he had planned it all from the beginning?

Planned it and then neglected to tell her? What if she'd insisted on calling the police?

She picked up the phone and dialed their home number but no one answered, not even the machine. He'd probably disconnected the phone until after the funeral.

Her funeral.

She turned on the six o'clock news and watched the anchorwoman running down the top local stories. "Police are still seeking the cause of a fatal one-car accident that claimed the life of Laura Walker last evening. Although the body was badly burned in the fiery crash, investigators were able to confirm the victim's identity this afternoon. Her husband, gallery owner Ron Walker, was opening an exhibition of artist Roscoe San Blas's paintings at the time of his wife's tragic accident."

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Laura turned off the television and thought about it. Ron had identified the body last night, but the police had confirmed her identity this afternoon. Exactly how had they done that? Her fingerprints were not on file anywhere, and there wasn't even a thumbprint on her driver's license. How else did they identify bodies?

Through dental records.

She remembered her fears of fading, the mistake on her driver's license, the wrong dental record at Dr. Frees's office. Was it possible? She looked in the directory and found Frees's home address. She had to talk to someone and she didn't want it to be the police, not yet.

A man answered on the second ring. "Frees," the familiar voice said.

"Doctor, this is one of your patients. I wonder if I could come over to see you."

"Is it an emergency? Who is this?"

"I—it's Laura Walker," she said in a soft voice.

"Who? Laura—?"

"Walker."

"But you're—"

"I have to see you, Doctor. Now, tonight!"

"Is it the tooth?"

"Just see me. Please!"

"All right," he agreed. "Give me an hour for dinner and I can see you around seven-thirty at my office."

She had no car so she called a taxi to take her to the office. The professional building was empty at this time in the evening, but the front door and the door to his office were unlocked. He was standing behind the reception counter in the white coat he always wore. "I couldn't believe it when you phoned, Mrs. Walker," he told her. "Is that a wig you have on?"

It seemed foolish to be wearing it now, and she slipped it off. "I had to talk to somebody. I'm in terrible trouble. If I'd called my friends they'd have contacted Ron."

He watched her carefully, perhaps thinking her deranged. "If you're alive, who was killed in that accident?" he asked.

"I believe it was a woman named Suzie Rawlings, a model."

"Rawlings? I think she's another patient of mine, someone your husband sent to me."

Laura's heart was beating faster. The pieces were beginning to fall into place. "Remember that dental record of mine that had the mistakes on it?"

He nodded. "I've been thinking about that. We had a break-in last week. This window behind me was broken but nothing seemed to be missing. I reported it to the police and they said it must have been someone looking for drugs." He laughed at the thought. "Nothing here except nitrous oxide, procaine, and a few other anesthetics."

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Laura took out her driver's license. "I noticed this the day I broke my tooth. It says I'm five-five when I'm actually five-seven."

He glanced at the license in her hand. "You must be mistaken. It looks like five-seven to me."

He was right. Her height on the license was now correct. "I swear I'm not crazy. Yesterday it said five-five! It's like my dental charts, changing back and forth. And there's a painting at my husband's gallery showing a woman resembling me fading into the background of the picture."

"You believe these things are connected, Mrs. Walker?"

"Yes. I believe a woman was killed in my place last night. And I'm afraid I might be next. I need help."

Dr. Frees nodded sympathetically. "You've come to the right place." He stepped to his left and opened the door to his private office. A tall balding man whom Laura had never seen before stepped out. "This is Detective MacLaine. I phoned him after I heard from you."

At nine o'clock the following morning Laura was back in the dentist's office. Marge, Dr. Frees's assistant and receptionist, seemed surprised to see her. "Mrs. Walker? Didn't I read—?"

"Same name, different person," Laura explained. "The doctor said he could work me in this morning. This tooth—"

"Certainly. He keeps this half-hour open for emergencies. He's on the phone now but I'll take you back and get you in the chair."

Marge led the way into the familiar room and fastened the paper bib around Laura's neck. The assistant had her back turned, getting out the records, when Laura said, "The police arrested my husband an hour ago. I expect they'll be coming for you next."

"What's that?"

"It might go harder on you, Marge, since you're the one who actually killed Suzie Rawlings."

The young woman turned then, and Laura saw the hypodermic needle in her hand. She lunged toward Laura's throat and might have made it but MacLaine and Frees both grabbed her and it was over.

"Lie still and calm down a bit before we talk," the dentist told her. "Your blood pressure's up."

"Shouldn't it be? I came that close to being killed."

"It was only a sedative," Frees explained. "I think she just wanted time to escape. She didn't know MacLaine had been hiding in my office since before she arrived this morning."

Calming down a bit at last, Laura shifted her gaze to the dentist. "I couldn't sleep all night after what we talked about. I kept thinking of her. With Ron."

"He's been my patient for a few years, but I never dreamed

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he and Marge were having an affair."

Detective MacLaine came back inside after turning the prisoner over to his partner. "It's pretty much as we figured last night. I'm afraid it was all your husband's idea, Mrs. Walker. He knew if you died in a suspicious accident so soon after taking out that joint half-million-dollar insurance policy he'd be a prime suspect even if he had an alibi. So he tried to plan a perfect crime. Someone else would die in your place. You'd remain alive and in hiding. If the police seemed seriously to suspect him of murder, he'd reveal that you were alive, deny any knowledge of the woman who died in your car, and plead guilty to the lesser charge of insurance fraud. If all went well and he was free of suspicion, he would wait for the insurance money to be paid, and the two of you would go off to California."

"And once he got me safely to California," Laura said, "there'd have been another accident before Marge joined him."

"Maybe," the detective agreed. "He planned to drive out there and anything could have happened crossing the desert. He'd leave here a grieving widower and arrive there the same way. The desert is a big place."

"What about my driver's license?"

"He took yours and had a counterfeit made with Suzie Rawlings's correct height on it. The face would be burned enough to rule out positive identification, but the height had to be correct. The height and the teeth. By mistake, the counterfeit got into your wallet and you happened to notice it. He switched it back before the accident, of course, which is why you didn't have it last night."

"The dental charts were another matter," Laura said. "If the police verified that the body in the car was mine, that meant the dental records had matched even though we corrected the mistake two days ago. Someone had switched my records and Suzie's back again. Not you, Doctor, because you called attention to the error in the first place. It had to be your assistant, Marge. When the police called for the records she simply gave them the wrong ones, as she'd planned to do all along. I wondered how she could be involved in this, but then I remembered she was an attractive young woman and my husband had been coming here for years. Of course it was Marge who lured Suzie to my car, knocked her out with an injection, and then drove the car off the road and set it on fire. Ron gave her the fake driver's license and his duplicate key to my car, of course."

Later Dr. Frees told her, "See, you weren't fading away after all."

"But I feel my life has faded away. My husband's in jail."

"And I have to look for a new assistant. Somehow I feel this whole thing was partly my responsibility, with the dental charts and all. Perhaps I could make amends by taking you out to dinner."

"Perhaps," she agreed. "When you have teeth that break as easily as mine, it's always good to be dining with a dentist." ●

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THE CHAPLAIN'S KACHINA

by John Riha

The big man began to cry. He put his hands to his face, and his massive shoulders shook and heaved. His huge fingers hid his eyes but tears leaked out and ran down his wrists and disappeared into the sleeves of his sweater, which was made of cashmere.

Michael Foster swallowed quietly. For the moment, there was nothing he could say. He sat at his desk and watched the big man's tears, watched them slip around his raw, battered knuckles and into the expensive sweater. Somewhere the day moved forward, but here, in Michael's small cinder-block office, time had become mired in thick, sticky grief. He resisted the urge to sigh. It had become a loathsome task, this watching men cry. Their sorrows filled everything up, robbed his office of air. Michael sat at his desk across from his weeping visitor and felt a fist of indifference push up from his gut, compressing his lungs, making it difficult to breathe. How could apathy grow inside him, Michael Foster, of all people? What psychic bruise had metastasized into a cancer of not caring? The big man gagged and Michael winced.

"Would you . . . like a Kleenex?" Michael tried, sliding a box of unscented tissues across the wood-laminate surface of his desk. He had seen players go through half a box at a sitting, forests felled to harvest the tide of an outside tackle's mucus.

"Father . . . " began the sobbing hulk.

"I'm not a priest," Michael put in pleasantly but perhaps a bit

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too quickly, considering. "I'm a chaplain." The face looked up, smooth and white and damp as a freshly peeled potato. "Priests are called Father," Michael explained. "Please, just call me Michael." He nudged the box of tissues forward a fraction.

A large hand reached out and plucked a tissue. Michael intertwined his own slender, elegant fingers and placed them on the desk. He offered what he hoped was a benevolent smile. He leaned slightly forward to demonstrate attentiveness. He wanted to die.

He had used to hope, in those early days, that his services would be sought as a portal to understanding, to epiphany, perhaps even to the light of Christ Himself. He had imagined, in naive vignettes framed by these very walls, the skillful counsel he would offer, the clever yarns that would grow on the loom of his logic into the whole cloth by which his giant-sized flock might warm themselves against the cold winds of doubt and damnation. He would cleanse their sensibilities with his quiet persuasions, leave their spirits bleached pure as river rock exposed to the sun. Revitalized, they would return to the battles with pure hearts and the courage of lions.

He was a fool.

"I'm sorry," wheezed the big man. "I'm just so confused. I don't know what to do."

Yes, left offensive tackle Larry Land was confused. So horribly muddled, and this is why he had come to Michael. His wife had been unfaithful. A sad story, but not uncommon. Three-hundred-and-thirty-five-pound Larry Land, the Packers' first-round draft choice two years ago, a weight-room legend who could bench-press four hundred pounds a dozen times, a one-man fortress who could pass-block an Amtrak, was now nothing but a whipped and humiliated puppy. Pathetic. If he wanted to, Michael could reach out and erase Larry Land as easily as wiping a smudge from a television screen. Wake up, Michael wanted to shout into that diamond-studded ear. Wake up and use the common sense that God gave snails. You married a strumpet; a whore. What did you expect from such a decision? That pool service and a white Mercedes would ensure a union of moral fortitude?

"I understand," Michael said softly. "Our lives are full of unexpected twists and turns. But this is by design. It's not always easy. Please, tell me about yourself. Where did you grow up?"

The enormous man looked up and blinked broadly and wiped a tear on the sleeve of his cream-colored sweater. "Oh," said Larry Land, struggling for air, "Gunder. A little town up northeast Iowa."

A little town up northeast Iowa. Michael might have guessed. These pie-crust white boys from the Midwest, these Cornhuskers and Hawkeyes, they were the most gullible in this sad business.

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They swaggered into training camp with their enormous signing bonuses and their ponytails and their beautiful black sports cars. Women trailed like happy dolphins in their effervescent wakes.

But their hearts, their crumbly, fragile hearts, were nothing but cookie dough. Flour and sugar and eggs baked in the gentle ovens of Grand Junction and Waterloo and then served warm and fresh to the first bosomy pompon girl who would give anything for an expensive night on the town. Somewhere along the way someone called it love, and no one seemed to know any better.

"God I love her," came the whimper, head in hands, fingers all pointed up, a phalanx of bratwurst, wedding band as gaudy as a carnival prize.

Michael looked past Larry Land's tiny head. Hung on the wall was a photograph of Bart Starr, that paragon of goodness and excellence. In the photo Starr was scampering back to pass, his legs crossed in backpedal, his head up as he looked downfield, focused, seeing past the edge of the photograph to where the golden finger of Christ would be pointing at the correct receiver, and soon Starr would throw and the result would be not just a first down or a score but a testament to the power of a life lived without greed and lust and other sicknesses of the heart. Years ago, Michael used to call attention to the picture to try and define certain moral horizons, but today's football player seemed bored with this invocation. Now, the photograph was simply Michael's private icon, and he beseeched it with prayer. Dear Saint Bart, have mercy on our stricken souls.

"Tell me about your wife," said Michael at last, and he took his clasped hands from the surface of his desk, leaned back carefully in his rolling office chair, repositioned his hands on his small stomach, and commenced to work.

Mrs. Larry Land opened the door for him and Michael died a little. They greeted and introduced themselves. Call her Kate, please. The house was enormous, as Michael had imagined, and autumn sunlight fell through expansive windows onto the quarried tile floor at his feet. Michael let his eyes roam about the interior but his interest was feigned. He did this to avoid looking too openly at Kate Land, who was young and extremely beautiful. She wore tight-fitting bib overalls and held a paint roller in her hand, and her cheeks were full of blush and finely speckled with paint. Most of the wives and girlfriends of the players were very good-looking, but Kate Land was beyond that. The full lower lip, the comets of dusty blond that coursed through her auburn hair, the easy smile, the soft curves, all threatened to pry open Michael's locked box of desire and thus detour him from his mission of grace and understanding. He stared up at the crystal hall chandelier

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and tried to erase the image of her eyes, which were soft, mossy green.

"This is a beautiful house," said Michael.

"Thanks."

"Are you painting?" he asked stupidly.

"I'm redoing the bathroom. For about the seventieth time. I'd take your coat but . . ." She held up the roller, still glistening wet. "Just throw it anywhere."

"All right."

"Hey, would you do me a favor?" She indicated with her toe a small plastic bucket with two brushes by the front door. "Bring that along, okay?"

"Sure." The rooms he could see were comfortably furnished with stuffed chairs, simple pine tables and consoles, unusual artwork that possessed energy and color without distraction. He saw vibrant portraits: a woman laughing; a horse's head. A tall glass sculpture stood in front of a window and tossed around handfuls of prismed light. It was all clean and balanced—difficult to picture the enormous and uncouth Larry Land compressed into this carefully composed frame.

"This is nice," Michael repeated.

"Thanks."

"Did you do this yourself?"

"Yeah, I did. I like doing it."

"Well, it's very nice."

"I have an associate's degree in design. I'd do more work but, you know, Green Bay is hardly a mecca of design."

"Oh, Green Bay is a great place, really." It just popped out—his chamber-of-commerce lie.

She made a small grimace. "You must be from around here."

"Appleton." He met her eyes directly. A mistake. She owned something inside him now.

"Hmm," was all she said.

"And you're from?"

"San Diego."

"Oh, I hear that's nice. Do you miss it?"

"Probably most of the time."

He followed her down the hall toward the kitchen, led by the narrow triangle of her back, the muscles as they shifted between her scapulas. In the middle of the hallway he discovered a series of niches set into the wall. Perched inside were colorful doll-like figurines, painted fantastic colors.

"Kachinas," Kate explained. "From Mexico and southwestern tribes. They're hot property now. I got these out West."

He nodded. Some of the dolls had bird faces and seemed frightening. "Do you think Indian children played with these?"

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She tilted her head. "I don't know. But you need to have a grouping, three or more, before they can work. I had the wall made just for them. I've got eleven right now, and room for two more. Thirteen's my lucky number."

In the kitchen, she dumped her roller into the sink and took the bucket he held and began washing the paint from the brush bristles. Creamy-colored water swirled into the drain. Michael clasped his hands behind his back.

She smiled. "What should I call you?"

She meant officially. He was used to the inquiry. "Just call me Michael," he replied. "I'm the team chaplain."

"Did you ever play football?"

He shook his head.

"You should have been a quarterback. You seem too big and nice-looking for a preacher."

He thought at first she was making a joke.

"Would you like something to drink?" she continued. "I've got some good carrot juice. Or maybe a soda? I don't suppose you want a beer?"

"Yes, a carrot juice," he responded, surprising himself. He hadn't had carrot juice in years. She poured it into a clear glass and the thick liquid turned up the side like a fold of cloth. He put his fingers to the cold glass to clear his mind.

She preempted him. "You want to talk to me about Larry?"

He nodded. "Thank you for seeing me."

She shrugged, waiting.

Michael cleared his throat. "Larry came to my office. At Lambeau. I have an office there."

She nodded patiently.

"He was quite upset." He waited for her to contribute something, anything, but realized there was nothing she could say until he got to the point. "He indicated that your marriage isn't as smooth as perhaps it could be."

"Ah, well. Next to marriage, Michael, pro ball is a walk in the park."

He nodded at this, grateful for the image. "Yes, it certainly is." How would he know, not having played either? "It can be a lot of work. That's also its strength, however. Commitment is a powerful tool for healing. It becomes essential when we think of going forward, of learning and growing."

She looked away.

"Have you thought about seeing a marriage counselor?" he asked. "The both of you? Together?"

She glanced at him sideways, past the glass of juice she held to her lips. When she brought it down, a thin orange moustache

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hung above her mouth. She sensed it and erased it with the back of her hand. "I thought that was your job."

"Of course. I'm always glad to help." Glad seemed wrong, under the circumstances. He made a mental note to choose his words more carefully. "I can recommend excellent people that counsel marriages for a living, if you'd like."

She ran her fingers through the crown of her hair, leaving it scattered. "This is all pretty new to me. To us. I'm not sure I know what's right."

"Do you mind if I speak frankly?"

She shrugged her assent.

"He told me that you're seeing another man."

She startled Michael by laughing. "Is that what he said?"

Michael nodded.

"Oh, that's rich. Rich." She shook her head, put a fist on her hip, looked up at him, green eyes luminous, face set by the need to conceal any pain. "I don't suppose he happened to mention Houston?"

Michael blinked. "Houston?"

"Yeah. And a pompon girl named Joyce? Joyce Le*Rouge?*" She threw the last syllable of the name like a lance.

"Well . . ."

"Hmm. Didn't think so. How about Seattle?"

Michael felt flushed, outflanked. "I'm afraid I don't . . . we didn't . . ."

She drank the rest of her carrot juice in a single swallow, set the glass on the counter. "I think you had your chain pulled, Padre."

"Well, I don't know, but he was definitely upset. He was crying," Michael added, hoping to lend some credence to his concerns, feeling too that in the telling he had violated Larry Land's trust.

She sighed, pursed her lips, looked out the window into the thick autumn sunlight. Her mahogany hair rolled and shimmered even as she stood still. It was wrong, coming here, at this awkward stage of his career. He should not have presumed to be of help when he himself was as brittle and empty as a milkweed pod in fall. His wisdoms were feigned; his knowledge of love was a forgery. She turned to him and began to list the many lies and foiled expectations that had come to characterize her marriage. He watched her hands as she painted her landscape of pain, saw the words tumble from her lips, but their meaning did not come to him, he could not make sense in the tangle of sounds. He nodded and knitted his brow and saw out the window that the sky beyond was a profound, unnatural blue, stitched across with migrating geese. The squares of sunlight that lay upon the tile floor were yellow and warm and Michael had a deep desire to curl up in them like an old, tired dog. The words of this woman were nails in his palms, pinning him to his cross of loneliness, holding him

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upright when he wanted desperately to lie down and sleep. The tribulations of her married life clanged against his skin like hail upon a roof of tin. He could not presume to understand, and his deafness frightened him.

But yes, he did care. Strangely, he cared for this small soft woman before him. He wanted more than anything to hold her, this beautiful stranger, press her tender face to his chest and listen to her with his arms instead of his patient, forgiving chaplain's ears.

He lay awake in his bed and watched ghost ships of stray light sail across his walls. He had at first told himself that this apartment would be temporary, only a few months or so, and then he would either buy a small house or else move, go on to a real ministry. That was three years ago.

He had done little to fix up his apartment. There were a few pieces of inexpensive rattan furniture, a pole lamp from Kresgee's. A painting of Jesus and John the Baptist knee-deep in the Jordan River. Another photograph of Bart Starr. In this photograph, several yards from Starr and quite diminished by the perspective of the photographer's lens, number five, Paul Hornung, the unabashed scamp and bon vivant of the glory-bound 1960s Packers, prepared to deliver a block at Starr's blind side, offering his unpure body in defense of his quarterback. Michael was unsure what message, if any, was written by Hornung's presence, and he pursed his lips for a moment of speculation.

He thought perhaps that Kate Land had flirted with him. A more experienced man would know such things. How did he end up so naive? His father. A decent man. They had gone to Packer games together. They ate hot dogs in steamed buns as the October air swam clean and cold around their faces. His father yelled occasionally when other fans did so, a bravado that seemed marvelously dangerous to a boy of nine. In a floppy-eared, insulated wool cap and black horn-rimmed glasses, his father rose and shook his mittened fist, the steam of his breath curling around the insults he aimed at the opposing players. Then he would sit back down and smile. "Don't tell Mamma I said that." Michael never did. Each epithet was fitted perfectly to the crush of the fans and the swirling joy of the game. His father was truly a mild man, a certified public accountant, a lover of root-beer floats and daytime TV game shows. A man whose genetic code, curled up inside his son's cells, released its biochemical message of restraint and temperance. He was not the man who could instruct Michael as to the subtleties of a woman's call.

Michael fell asleep thinking of Kate Land and how, if he could marry her, she would decorate their bedroom.

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At the request of Larry Land, he went to see her again. She didn't seem to mind. She was always engaged in some kind of construction, tools scattered about, her unreal beauty given an agreeable patina of plaster dust and wood stain. She puttered and Michael helped where he could, retrieving buckets and electrical cords and steadying her ladder, his hand close to her slender calves. As she worked they talked, and he was grateful for the distraction and cooperation that the tasks implied. She told him of growing up in southern California, and dropping out of Chico State and wandering back down to San Diego where she worked in a bar and met Larry Land when he was in town for a game. She had thought he was dangerous and exciting, and Michael winced to hear it because it reminded him of what he was not. Their marriage invited troubles on many levels, some trivial, some deep. As a husband, Larry Land seemed to be all about lies and deceptions, half-truths and hypocrisies. He claimed to love his wife, yet his behavior, as Kate described it, was selfish and immature. Michael tried to counsel reasonably.

"He's still young and growing up," Michael said, his voice even. "He's used to being a star. A hero. Even at college. Then he goes in the first round." Michael shrugged. "Sometimes, the first-rounders get a bit out of hand. All the money, the fame. They have agents saying they're superstars. They've got fans telling them they walk on water. Then they come home to, you know, a household routine. Responsibilities. It's not easy."

"That big dork comes home to one beautiful wife," she replied, brandishing a drywall trowel. "And a beautiful home."

Michael nodded. It was true, and the truth of it made his words ring hollow. She might have been enough for any man just standing there doing nothing. But she was so energetic, so committed to her home. Her sincerity was heroic. Michael again wanted to reach out and touch her, and tell her what he thought, but of course he did not.

He bought the kachina immediately. It cost $450. He bought it before any ethic or common sense could dissuade him. As he waited for his VISA to be processed, he suppressed guilt by calculating how long it would take for him to pay it off. Not long. Even though he made a modest salary, he had very few ways to spend it. The doll stood upright on the counter of the airport gift shop, in plain view, as the woman moved slowly through the payment process. The doll had a long tribal skirt and a wild corona of what Michael supposed were feathers. It had a large cylindrical head and reptilian feet. He imagined giving the kachina to Kate Land and telling her that she was pretty. He would say it in an off-

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hand way, much the way she had casually told him he was good-looking.

"That's a real antique," the woman behind the counter pointed out.

Michael glanced into the Phoenix airport terminal. Most of the players were in the executive lounge but a few roamed around. He signed the slip of paper, grabbed the cardboard gift box, and fled thinking: *Stupid idiot!*

On the plane back from Phoenix the players were crazy, unsettled. The Packers did not play well and nearly lost a game they should have won easily. Only a dropped touchdown pass had allowed them to escape. So their celebration was off-center and had an edge of menace. Players stalked the aisles. They growled and shook fingers.

"Hey, Tooch? You like that flanker's backside? You watchin' it go by all game long."

"Chill out, baby."

"Man, you got to fly on that hammer roll, you know? I put my Nikes right up your numbers you don't buy me some ground, baby."

A chorus: "Sit down."

Michael sat in the first-class section of the chartered plane by default. Coach Hargrove sat here, and the offensive coordinator Happy Stam, and some of the assistants and trainers. No one sat next to the chaplain on the off chance the chaplain might be looking to serve some redemption on the wing. That was not Michael's style, however. He had learned not to quote verse outside of the Sunday service. Still, no one took a chance.

He was surprised and even a little panicked then, when an hour out of Houston offensive tackle Larry Land, hair dried at crazy angles from a quick post-game shower and exit, lowered his bulk into the adjacent seat.

"Howdy, preacher," said Land, breath full of beer.

"Hello, Larry," returned Michael. The big man swelled up over the seat partition. He looked down at Michael from a great height, the young, smooth, fat face still red with victory, the small eyes not in scale to the enormous body. It was easy not to like Larry Land, and Michael indulged the feeling.

The big man ran his tongue inside his lower lip, his eyes frosted. At last he said, "I appreciate you comin' over to see Katie."

Michael nodded.

"Sorry I haven't been by to see you again. I been kinda busy."

"Sure, Larry." Michael could barely breathe, afraid of disturbing what he sensed was a delicate balance. "You guys looked good today."

Land closed his eyes and slumped. "We stunk." He opened one

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eye and used it to stare at Michael. "Did you see me dump Brian Smith in the third? And again in the fourth, on that screen?"

"Sure, yeah."

"Man, that was sweet. I buried him. I hit that brother so hard he's going to wake up and find his tongue coming out his ear." Land chuckled and settled even deeper into the wide first-class seat. Happy Stam glanced over his shoulder at the two of them, the incongruity. Michael was sure that Land was taunting him, torturing him. That he intended to stay put until they landed, to stay next to Michael until the chaplain reached into the overhead bin and pulled out the secret, the foolish secret he had placed there. And then . . .

Land groaned: "My back." Followed by: "Listen, it's my birthday next Saturday. Me and some of the boys are going out celebrating. Waddaya say?"

Michael blinked. "I'm sorry." He waved a hand near his ear. "What was that?"

"I'm having a little party. Nothing fancy. Go out on the town. You're invited." The tackle poked Michael in the ribs with a large index finger.

"Me?"

Land smiled; the diamonds in his earlobe picked up unexpected light. "Bet you don't get out much. Huh? Am I right or am I right?"

"Well . . ."

"It's a Thursday game. There's no Saturday night curfew. We thought maybe having a preacher around will keep us out of trouble. You know?"

"I don't drink, really."

"Haw. Sure you do. Little brewski now and then. So, what's it going to be?"

The guilt arrived then, of course, and made him say yes.

They came for him in a pickup truck, a large four-wheel-drive vehicle with an extended cab. Larry Land rode shotgun. The punter, Tim Sabonney, drove. Sabonney had a thin and menacing face that was not softened by light from the dashboard. Michael climbed into the small jump seat in back.

"Who else is coming?" Michael said merrily, affecting an insouciance he hoped would mask his trepidation.

"This is it," Land said over his shoulder, and the truck heaved forward. They drove west for a while and the two players talked and joked, but Michael could not quite hear the conversation over the whine of the big tires on the pavement. At last they pulled in and parked in front of a low building. Michael got out and his heart fell. A big neon sign proclaimed BOSCO'S DREAM MILL. Another sign, smaller and hand-lettered, said "Totally Topless."

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"I can't go in there," said Michael weakly, his face struck by pulsing neon. Larry Land brought his head down from a great height and placed it in front of Michael's. His eyes were wide; he had been drinking already.

"Sure you can," insisted Land. "It's easy. Watch." And his huge left hand grasped Michael's arm above the elbow. A nod from Land and the punter grabbed Michael's other arm. Together the men lifted Michael clear off his feet and toward the door.

"Package for Tiffany Twist!" shouted Sabonney around a clenched cigar, eyes squinting against the smoke. Land guffawed.

So this was how it was going to be. He should have known that he would be more entertainment than companion for these men. He closed his eyes and shook his head. He was along for the amusement of morons. Land paid for him but Sabonney kept a hand at his elbow, making his thin muscles ache. What was it about punters that they seemed excessively perverse? Did they have more to prove?

"Will I see you guys at service tomorrow?" Michael managed. For a long moment the two players stopped, completely silent. Then they laughed enormously. The hand at Michael's elbow went away, and they were inside.

They found a table near the front and ordered beers. The dancers came and left. The music pounded. Arms and hips and legs moved in and out of harsh lights. Michael told himself that the experience was important for his social awareness, for his understanding of the men. But then he felt horribly debauched. He had lacked the courage to say no. As a moral leader, he was a fraud. He sipped beers that disappeared too quickly and his eyes began to hurt from smoke. A half-naked girl came by and Tim Sabonney blew rings at her and she artfully skewered them with her pierced tongue.

"Drink up, preacher!" bellowed Land, his ponytail undone and shards of hair hanging over his shoulder. Michael now truly despised this man. This place, this den, marked the sickness of the marriage. Larry Land was a jerk. He did not deserve Kate. And Kate deserved much better—someone who cared. Michael cared.

Michael drank as a defense, grateful for the veil that began to obscure the noises and the pink bodies. A girl suddenly straddled his lap, her face inches from his. Humiliated and weakened, he could not protest as she ground down on him. The players whooped. He tried to concentrate on the stage curtain over the girl's shoulder but the curtain was dirty and torn and looking at it made him feel ill. He closed his eyes and found the face of Kate Land smiling up at him, telling him he was good-looking.

"Kate," he moaned.

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"What?" shouted Larry Land.
"Ride, preacher, ride!" yelled the punter.

In the morning, he woke and barely made it to the bathroom before he vomited. He got down on his hands and knees and retched into the bowl and watched as the strings of silvery phlegm attached to his lips were pulled off into the swirling waters. Surely there is no more debased creature than a man who makes supplication to a toilet bowl. His head hurt; Sunday worship service would begin in less than an hour. Idiot. He wanted to strangle Larry Land, but he did not have the strength to clearly conjure the meaty throat pinched between his slender fingers. In truth, Larry Land had not made him get down on all fours in front of the toilet. He had done that all on his own. There was no one to blame but himself.

The dry heaves soon followed, bile hot in his esophagus.

By Monday Michael had recovered. He was miraculously cleansed, in fact. As if the weekend depravity and the sickness that followed had somehow purged his soul. He was glad to be alive. Kate had called him up early and said she wanted to talk some more, that he was such a comfort to her. He felt renewed by her voice. The kachina rocked gently in the passenger's seat of his Honda Accord as he drove.

The entrance to the exclusive housing development was flanked by pillars of cobblestone rising fifteen feet and topped by red and blue pennants that hung bright and still in the clear quiet cold of the day. He had been here in other years, visiting other players and their families. There was the house of the running-back coach, Hank Costelli. Costelli had been an average assistant coach but had made a small fortune with a fried chicken franchise in six Midwestern states. Over there was the former house of quarterback E. J. Kerr, the all-pro who suffered a storied mental breakdown in the third quarter of a game in 1984. Michael wondered, only briefly, where Kerr had ended up.

The house of Larry and Kate Land had a long circular brick driveway lined by cedar trees that were perfectly symmetrical and all the same height. It was a fairyland drive. In front of the big colonial was Kate's red Saab Turbo. He parked and got out. He stood for a moment at the dark green front door and let the brisk air swirl inside his open collar. On the concrete stoop were a variety of small tools Kate had set out after she had cleaned them. A drywall saw, a prybar, a drywall mud tray, a chalk line and reel. He bent down and gathered them up, putting the kachina under his arm. The front door was open. He nudged it wide with an elbow, peered inside.

"Hello?" he called.

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"Back here!" came Kate's beautiful voice, and Michael followed the sound to the rear of the house and the family room. Kate was standing in the middle of the room. Michael was startled to see Larry Land lying on the floor, curled up and sleeping on Kate's newly installed Mexican quarry tiles. The tackle wore his trademark street clothes—a three-quarters length black leather coat and a yellow bandanna tied pirate-fashion around his head. It took Michael a long moment to register the dark stain spreading through the bandanna and out across the tiles.

"Oh my God!" Michael stammered. "What happened?"

Kate shrugged. "He died."

"What? What? Dear Jesus!" Michael moved forward, his head woozy, but Kate Land halted him.

"Stop right there, Padre."

He looked up and realized she was holding a small gun. Inexplicably, it was pointed at him. Michael choked. "What are you doing? Good God, we need to call someone. A doctor. Quick."

Kate seemed amused. "It's too late. He's gone."

Michael's legs no longer wished to support him and he sank to his knees, onto the cool brown tiles. He watched, stunned, as the oily stain moved, seeping into the grout lines. "Did you . . . ?" Fearing the marriage had come to the absolute worst possible conclusion.

"No. You did."

"What?"

She shrugged. "You killed him."

Michael shook his head. He was weak and dizzy and the sickness from the weekend was returning as an amber wash before his eyes. "What are you saying?"

She lifted her chin, indicating his burden of tools. "You hit him with that prybar. I saw you. Then I got this gun." She gave the weapon a little shake.

"But I didn't . . ."

"Oh, but you did. Your fingerprints are even on the murder weapon."

Dumbfounded, he looked down at his burden of tools. He could see, stuck on the hooked end of the prybar, a bit of yellow material. Some hair. And a stain. He dropped everything and it all clattered to the hard floor. The kachina fell too and one of its arms broke off.

"Your emotions got in the way of your better judgment. You were jealous. You hated Larry."

It sounded so farfetched, so extreme. So strangely true.

"Was that for me?" Kate wanted to know, pointing at the Indian doll.

He looked down at the odd face, the grotesque features of his gift, and nodded.

"Nice touch," she said, raising her gun. ●

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THE ROAD'S END

by Brendan DuBois

The meet took place at a small cafe next to the Hemingway House in Key West. It was a hot day for April and I sat outside on a small wooden deck at the cafe, sipping a frozen strawberry fruit drink. I had on a blue knit polo shirt, khaki pants, and deck shoes. At my feet was a small knapsack that held bottled water, maps, and a 9mm. Smith & Wesson semiautomatic pistol. A lot of the traffic going by on Whitehead Street was sunburnt tourists in bathing suits on motor scooters, hooting and hollering at each other. I thought for a moment about speeding traffic and what a spill on asphalt would do to all that exposed flesh, and decided that while messy, it could definitely improve the species' gene pool.

Across the way was a block of apartment buildings painted a dull yellow. Chickens pecked slowly at the dead lawn as laughing young men in shorts and lots of gold jewelry polished their motorcycles and BMW convertibles in the shade. Nice what crack-cocaine sales can do to the local economy. There was movement to my left and she sat down, dropping a large Vuitton purse to the deck floor. She carried a Corona beer with a bit of lime floating in

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the liquid, and I didn't have the heart to tell her that particular drink wasn't in this year.

Her dark black hair was pulled back in a simple ponytail. She had on aviator's sunglasses and a round straw hat, and was wearing a light cotton sundress with lots of tiny blue flowers. I wasn't close enough to see what kind of flowers they were, but I was close enough to see how nicely she filled out the dress. She got right to the point. "He's here, isn't he?"

"Nice to see you, too," I said.

"I'm paying you for information and results," she said, quietly adjusting the folds of her sundress. "Not for idle chitchat. So. He's here, isn't he?"

A writer who made his debut in *EQMM*'s Department of First Stories, Brendan DuBois has expanded his range to include stories for other national magazines such as *Playboy*, and novels in both the hard-boiled and thriller category. Even in his short stories, Mr. DuBois has always been inclined toward big, thrillerish themes, often involving hit men and conspiracies. The following story involves a variation on those themes.

"Yes, he is," I said. "Staying at a bed-and-breakfast a couple of streets over, on Simonton. Just got there yesterday."

"Do you think he knows I'm here as well?"

"Probably," I said. "Look, a lot depends on what you do. I still think—"

She turned and smiled at me, a smile without an ounce of compassion or humor. "Mr. Foss, I pay you for a lot of things. Thinking isn't one of them. The time is still set for tonight, at Mallory Square. During the sunset."

"Lots of people there," I pointed out. "Tourists, street people, performers. Lots of witnesses."

She took a delicate sip of the beer. "That's all right. I like crowds."

"I don't."

"Too bad," she said, and then she left.

As he took his shower, he thought of being in Key West and he couldn't get over the flatness of it all. Monroe had grown up in the Green Mountains of Vermont and liked the lively nature of the landscape. The rolling hills and mountains. The dirt roads that led deep into the dark woods. The craggy notches in the steep hills, water streams coursing down the granite rock. But here . . . This whole place seemed like an amusement park for adults. Everything was too flat, too bright, too loud. The spindly plants and trees with odd leaves looked like they had been dropped as spores from outer space, there was not a high point to be seen,

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and the sun was too bright and too hot.

But he had to be here.

He shut off the shower and stepped out, toweling himself, feeling tired yet again. He knew he should take a nap—God, had he ever had a real good night's sleep these past months?—but he had work to do if he was going to find her tonight. Lots of work. He looked at himself in the mirror, and as before, did not like what he saw.

In his mind's eye he knew what he should look like: the youngest detective ever in the Vermont State Police, lean body muscled and trim after hours of work in the gym and jogging on the narrow mountain roads, dark brown hair cut short, brown eyes sharp and inquisitive. What he now saw was something different. His body had grown soft after long hours on the road and lots of late-night fried meals and no time for exercise. His eyes were tired and often red-rimmed, and even his hair was different. It was now streaked with gray and it was longer, reaching his shoulder blades. He gingerly reached up and touched the shower-wet hair at the right side of his head.

There. The ridge of scar tissue that snaked around the side of his skull, the fold of flesh that was a reminder, every second, every minute, every day, of when he had been shot down in his unmarked cruiser, shot down and left for dead. Lucky for him the EMTs had been quick that day, for he had noted the crime-scene photos later, while in the hospital, talking to his friends on the force. What he saw in those photos should have led to a gravesite. He recalled one photo—thankfully black and white—with him lying to one side, the seat belt still cinching him in. The side of his head was a mess, with blood, bone, hair, and bits of brain tissue leaking out. His right arm was extended, hand curled, like it was looking for some sort of ghost weapon to hold. He had looked at the photo a number of times and was always surprised at what he felt at seeing it, for he felt nothing. Not a thing. It was like he was looking at some life-sized and realistic mannequin of himself, made up and bloodied for a training program or something. Not real.

He touched the scar tissue on his head again. That was real. That and another photo.

Monroe went out to his room, got dressed in dark green shorts and a Hawaiian shirt that was black with bright pink flamingos. He let the shirttails hang over the shorts. He put on a leather belt and fastened his weapons: mace canister to immobilize, plastic handcuffs to prevent movement, and six-inch knife to wrap things up. It was too dangerous nowadays to try to move firearms across state borders, and during the last year, he had moved across many of them.

He sat down, went through some of his belongings on the nightstand, locating a torn sheet from a Key West guidebook. Mallory

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Square was circled, with the word "sunset" written next to it. The sheet had been placed in an envelope and slid under the door in his hotel room up north last week, five hundred miles ago, as the long chase proceeded south. He also pulled out a blurry Polaroid photo. It showed a woman with black hair pulled back in a ponytail. She was wearing a white turtleneck sweater and she was at a bar, talking to someone. A partner? A confederate? He put the photo down on the bed, touched his head again. Monroe wasn't sure.

But he was sure of two things. That woman in the photo, whom he had chased south to this place for many months, was the one responsible for the bullet in his head.

And if he was lucky, tonight he would pay her back.

On Simonton Street I leaned against a utility pole, a tourist's guide to Key West in my hands, my knapsack at my feet. The small two-story homes and buildings along the street were built an arm's-width apart. Up the block was a place called the Sleepy Cat Inn, and when I saw him step out onto the sidewalk, wearing shorts and a shirt that looked like it belonged on an island called Maui, I made my move. The inn consisted of a handful of reconditioned two-story bungalows set around a swimming pool now empty of swimmers. I went up to Room 12 and after a quick moment or two with some unique tools that are against the law in most states, I was in. The room felt damp, as if the man in here had just taken a shower. I made a quick toss of the room, saw the usual clothes, bundles of maps, guidebooks, and a couple of paperback thriller novels. On the nightstand I saw an old photo, one I picked up and examined. My client. How nice to have everything confirmed. I put everything back in its place and within another minute or so I was outside in the sunshine. In the pool, a slim blonde was now treading water, wearing something skimpy and orange. She smiled and winked at me, and I smiled and winked back, then walked away.

Sorry. This evening my heart belonged to another, one who was paying the bills.

Monroe planned for a quick meal at one of the dozens of restaurants that lined Duval Street, shoved in between T-shirt emporiums and stores that sold jewelry, painted conch shells, and sand sculptures in glass bottles. He sat in the back, near an exit door, and away from the throngs of people and the loud traffic that moved along Duval. The restaurant featured Italian food, and thirty seconds after sitting down, he had forgotten the name of the place. That had been a recurring problem; ever since the shooting. Forgetting most things and, at odd occasions, remembering certain unimportant things. Like right now. He remembered

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smelling fresh chalk, wiping down a blackboard at recess time at the Catholic grammar school he went to, with Sister Mary Fatima working at her wooden desk, writing something with a big black fountain pen, the rest of the room empty. He closed his eyes for a moment, remembering everything about that day. Lunch was a bologna and cheese sandwich on white bread. Potato chips in a little plastic bag. Small chocolate bar for dessert. He had on gray slacks, white shirt, and blue tie.

Quick, now. Last week. Where were we last week? One of the Carolinas. North or South? Couldn't remember. He clenched a fork in his hand. Could not remember.

Last year, then. The day we were shot. What was going on?

His eyes were still closed. He remembered odd snippets, as if he were watching a show during a wind storm, the television cable cutting in and out. He had been working a case, something involving smuggling across the Canadian border. Then, that day—it had been fall, that's right, fall, because the leaves were changing color—the woman in the photo. Somehow she came to the forefront. He was on his way to talk to her, to confront her. Then . . .

"Here you go," the waitress said, sliding a plate onto the table. "Enjoy your meal."

He opened his eyes, remembering now. A roadblock on a small county road. A pickup truck. That had been it. And then . . .

A blow to the head. Darkness. Some lights, some weeks in the hospital. More darkness.

And then the chase began, the chase to find the woman, the one who had set him up.

Monroe picked up a fork, began eating his pasta dish.

Tonight. It would all happen tonight.

I munched on a couple of pizza slices out on the crowded sidewalk of Duval Street, waiting for him to leave the restaurant. This was my first time in Key West and I wished I had more time to poke around and enjoy it. I grew up in Boston, in one of the neighborhoods where you're identified by which church parish you attend rather than by what street you live on. It was an okay place, but it still had that old New England reserve and narrow focus. Feuds were passed down from generation to generation, like some awful heirloom—a horsehair couch, for example—that you hate but feel honor bound to accept. And there was a chilly way of dealing with neighbors that seemed to match the cold winds that came off Boston Harbor in January. My father, for example, knew our upstairs neighbor in our apartment building for more than thirty years, yet he still insisted on calling him Mr. Schwartz. I think he died without even knowing the man's first name.

Tourists and real conch residents strolled by me, heading to the

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free show at Mallory Square. Well, if there was one word to describe Key West, it sure wouldn't be reserved. There was a bright energy to everything, a sense that tomorrow would be an even better day than today. I looked past the ticky-tacky of the tourist shops and the bars with the loud music and signs advertising wet T-shirt contests to the tiny homes with decorative wood scrollwork around the windows, to the bars that seemed to attract the locals, people with leathery skin and wide smiles and a cheery attitude that said they were living in paradise and if you were too dumb to know that, you were probably too dumb to keep on breathing.

I finished my pizza wiped my hands on some paper napkins I had stuck in my pants pockets. My knapsack came off the sidewalk and went back over my shoulder. Keep focused, keep focused on the job and the client, I thought. A lot could go wrong in the next few hours, and I was being paid quite handsomely to ensure that it didn't.

Nice to know someone still had trust in my skills and abilities.

Monroe left the restaurant and joined the throngs of people going up Duval Street, heading in the general direction of Mallory Square. It felt like some great migratory movement and—

—he remembered a nature show, a television program on the old black and white TV set in the corner of the living room one Sunday night, eating popcorn that Mom had made on the stove, watching a nature special about caribous moving across the tundra, and that's what it was like, this movement of people.

He stopped for a moment, closed his eyes, and then opened them and kept on walking. Damn his memory. Damn it to hell.

But then he remembered, felt better. He knew some things for sure, and one was that the woman would be here tonight, in just an hour or so. Under his shirt he gently caressed the knife scabbard and kept on going up Duval Street.

I got to Mallory Square ahead of schedule and waited. My client was nearby, somewhere well hidden, I was sure. I scanned the crowd and spotted the target with no problem, thanks to the Hawaiian shirt he was wearing. I sat on a stone park bench and tried to relax, taking a series of long, slow, deep breaths. I hoped this would wrap up quickly and without too many problems. It had been a long haul and I was tired, but the money had been good, quite good.

I folded my arms, keeping an eye on the target. The money had been about the only good thing about this whole nutty affair. I had been reluctant to take the case, until my client eventually wore me down with her entreaties.

"It's dangerous, you know," I had said back in my Boston office. "Lots of opportunity for things to go wrong."

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"I don't care," she had said, hands clasped firmly around that same Vuitton handbag. "I hear you're the best at what you do."

"Who told you that?"

She shrugged. "Word gets around."

Sure does, I thought, opening my knapsack and taking out a bottle of water. After nearly a decade of patrol work, I had been a Boston detective for a few years and quickly realized that without kissing the right butt or supporting the right city council member, my career was doomed. I cashed out, opened my own private-investigation business, and quickly found an affinity for a certain type of work. I guess it has to do with my upbringing, being the oldest child with four sisters. My younger sisters—though sometimes a torment and a tease—came to depend on me to help them out when asked. My sisters being who they are, they didn't ask often. But when they did ask for help, I jumped in with both feet and both fists.

My first client was a woman whom I had dated years ago while on the job, who went to law school at night and got her degree. She and her small firm specialize in family cases, the ugly stuff that people whisper to each other in office hallways or household kitchens, of domestic abuse and custody rights and stalkings. Very shortly I learned to enjoy resolving stalking cases the best, when an ex-boyfriend or ex-husband still refused to take no for an answer. My lawyer friend and client, who no longer dates men, doesn't ask me for too many details, which is fine. I just promise that the problem will be taken care of, and within a day or two it usually is, after a to-the-point visit. One or two times, though, the ex-boyfriend or ex-husband didn't quite understand my message to leave his former girlfriend or wife alone, which meant a repeat, and more thorough, visit from me.

I've heard that those ex-boyfriends and ex-husbands are now doing well, after months of physical therapy.

So what I was doing in Mallory Square was initially the same type of case I had handled dozens of times before.

But tonight, well, tonight was going to be something out of the ordinary.

I finished my water and waited.

Monroe looked around at the crowds of people, everyone pushing to get as close to the edge of Mallory Square as possible, where there were docks and the wide expanse of water. He was initially dismayed at how many people were there. They were crowded in, almost shoulder to shoulder, watching the glow of the sun head to the western horizon, watching each other, or watching the performers and the tables and booths selling everything from painted T-shirts to hot dogs and popcorn. The performers included a dog that walked on a tightrope, a man who would take a running start and

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dive through a plastic hoop, and a muscled, cursing man in black shorts and a tanktop who balanced a washing machine on his face.

How to find her, he thought desperately, how to find her in this circus?

He closed his eyes again, forced himself to relax. He would find her, he knew he would. And though he was by himself in this packed square, he knew he wasn't alone. All the way down south—from Interstate 91 in Vermont to I-95 in Connecticut and New York, along the old and narrow Route 1, all the way down the East Coast—he had gotten help here and there. A quick phone call to his motel room at night. A newspaper clipping on the front seat of his truck. And like last week, that guidebook page slipped into his room at night, a page that had brought him to Key West.

Monroe wasn't sure who was on his side, but he could guess. It had to be his old buddies on the force, ones who couldn't come out and say they were helping him. He remembered odd bits from the time after the shooting, from a medal award ceremony at his hospital bedside with the governor of Vermont to an uncomfortable meeting with doctors, lawyers, and senior state police officials where he was officially put on medical leave for the rest of his life. No word about the woman, the woman who had set him up. No one would talk to him about it, which told him that she had to have been someone powerful, someone influential, someone who could quash a case like that.

So in Vermont he had started looking for her on his own, and after a month or two, the little tips came, the little hints, signals that he had not been forgotten, signals that he still mattered. Hints and signals that had sent him south on this long chase.

He turned and there she was.

Two young ladies in braided ponytails, wearing white shorts and white bikini tops, and juggling flaming torches to the appreciative claps and shouts from the crowd, were threatening to break my concentration, and were doing a very good job of it.

So I tossed a dollar bill on the blanket before them and looked to the south, and there was my client, walking up from Front Street. She had on the same wide hat but was now wearing a white sundress, so white that it made her stand out. I swiveled my head and there he was, heading to her, his eyes focused like twin spotlights, heading right to her.

There, she was there, just like they had promised.

A brief touch under his shirt to his knife and he started walking, then walking very fast, and then running, trying to get past all the people in the square, all the people here just to see a goddamn sunset. They were in the way, all of them.

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He brushed past them, bumping and jostling, and there she was, still there at the edge of the square, and he saw that she had now noted him. There was a look there, of recognition, of . . . something else, and then fear.

She turned and started running as well.

He tried to move faster, tried to get to his knife, while the people behind him started clapping and cheering as the sun began to set.

For a guy who had been living out of motels for the past year, he sure moved fast. He plowed through the crowd like an icebreaker going through a frozen lake, and I got up and moved with him, flanking him from the right. I took a series of deep breaths, getting focused, keeping an eye on my client—who had now turned and walked quickly around a brick building—and then on the target—who had broken out in a fast trot. I started running as well, unzipping the knapsack while on the move, reaching in with my free hand. Then the target moved around the corner of the building and I tried to catch up with him, the two of us now on Front Street.

Monroe lost sight of her for a second, and then there she was, the white dress making her stand out as she moved along the street. He could feel himself getting closer, getting so close that he could make out the way she moved, the dress flapping against her legs as she moved towards a parked car, a black limousine, about twenty yards ahead.

So close!

He willed himself to move faster, make those out-of-shape legs pump and race and catch up, get within range.

He pulled out the Mace canister and ran through his mind what he was going to do next, because he knew he was going to make it, he was so close, just another yard or two and he'd grab her and Mace her face, and then—well, there were a few quiet alleys around here, so many people were out on the square, watching the sunset—then, he'd get to work.

A few more seconds, that's it.

Yes!

He reached out to grab her shoulder and—

He was back in the front seat of the police cruiser, closing in, and his head exploded.

In my years on the Boston police force I've done a few things I've not been proud of, from not saying anything as a rookie while watching some of the older cops trade "favors" with the working women in the Combat Zone to when I was a new detective and looked the other way as seized drug money mysteriously shrank

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from ten thousand dollars at the bust site to five thousand dollars when it was inventoried at the station.

But that was nothing compared to how I felt when I caught up with the target and pulled out my 9mm. and smartly rapped him on the side of the skull where I knew he was weakest.

He fell like a sack of lead shot, and as I put the pistol back into my knapsack, I said out loud, for the benefit of whatever witnesses were sober enough to see what was going on, "Jack, I told you not to drink so much. Here, let me help you."

Which is what I did, I guess. I half-dragged, half-carried him over to a park bench. I propped him up and checked his breathing, which was steady. He started murmuring, moving around, and I looked up and saw my client staring at me, hate in her face, and then she got into her limousine and disappeared down the street.

I checked the target's breathing one more time, and then left, feeling like I was going to throw up.

The things I do for a paycheck.

Monroe walked slowly for long minutes, hand touching again and again the raised bump on the side of his head. So close, damn, he had been so close and then—

What had happened?

He touched his head again. Ambushed, that's what. Ambushed just as he was within a few yards of settling this thing once and for all. Damn that woman.

He wandered for a few minutes, trying to let the pain in his head ease, as the other pain inside him grew in dismay at what had happened. Damn it, so close, so close, and would he ever have a chance again?

Before him there was a knot of tourists, laughing, and there were flares of light as pictures were taken around an object, a large object that looked like an ocean buoy marooned on land. Monroe came closer to see what all the attention was about, and then he saw it was a marker of some sort. Painted red, black, and yellow, it said SOUTHERNMOST POINT, and the sense of failure grew inside him, and then he remembered something else: when he was in fifth grade, trudging home from the school-bus stop, report card now soggy in his sweaty fist because it had two D's listed inside, a D in English and a D in math, and how was he going to tell Mom and Dad that he had failed like that, how was he going to do it?

He stared at the monument, at the laughing tourists, the taste of failure strong in his mouth. The road's end. He had chased her here, all the way south, and for what?

And would he ever have the chance again?

❖ ❖ ❖

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I made a quick stop at the motel room and then met up with her at a marina on the other side of the island, not part of Old Town, and not particularly attractive. There were a lot of chain motels and chain stores and fast-food restaurants, and lots of bright neon. I wished I was back in Old Town.

We were upstairs in a private bar and she looked up at me, the attractive face still soured some by the look of hatred I had seen a half-hour ago, the look of hatred that had been directed at me and not the target. There was an empty glass by her elbow, and I saw she was working on at least her second drink of the evening.

"And?" she said, her voice sharp.

I sat down and looked for a bartender, but the room was empty. No drinks for you, I thought, as I said, "As well as could be expected. I kept him under view after you left, and he got up and started walking."

"So he wasn't seriously injured?"

"Not that I could tell."

"And you think that's as well as could be expected?"

I stared at her, forgetting for the moment how much she was paying me. "Yes, I do. And considering what he had planned for you, I'd think a bit more appreciation on your part would be appropriate."

She took another stiff swallow, grimaced. "You do, do you?"

"Yes, I do."

Then she sighed and her brittle exterior seemed to melt away, and she looked away from me for a moment and her eyes filled. "Damn," she said, sighing. "You're right. It's just that . . . damn . . . It's a hell of a thing, isn't it, when you have to worry about being killed by someone you love?"

"It is," I said, remembering our first meeting, back in my Boston office. "It certainly is."

"It's because of that shooting," she said defiantly.

"Yes."

Then she retold the story, as if making up for whatever guilt she was feeling, I guess. "Late last year, a selectman in our town, he snapped after he lost an election. Took his collection of guns and started hunting his enemies in the town. I was the editor of the town paper and probably right on the top of his hit list. Monroe . . . he was in the area, heard on the scanner what was happening, went up to my house, and was ambushed . . . shot right in the head."

Lord, I needed a drink. She kept on looking away from me.

"He suffered some brain damage, including memory problems. And the other thing."

"I know," I said. "For some reason, whenever he thought of you, he remembered the shooting. And he thought the two were connected, that you were behind it."

She nodded, took another sip of the drink. "That's right. At first

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he was kept in a secure hospital but he . . . he kept on trying to escape, trying to set himself free, trying to get after the woman he thought had injured him. He was like a caged animal in there, getting worse and worse, and finally, I signed him out, in my own care. It took a lot of work and some affidavits, but I let him loose. I had to. You have sisters, don't you, Mr. Foss?"

"I do."

"Then if you're close to them, you know what it's like. You'd do anything for them, anything at all. And since I had come into some money earlier . . . Well, I had the means to take care of him."

"By letting him chase you across the United States?" I asked, repeating again the same question I had asked her earlier in Boston.

"Yes," she said, now looking at me, tears streaming down her cheeks. "Because he's my brother."

Monroe stepped into his motel room, saw the plain brown envelope on the floor. His heart started racing. Could it be? Could it? He picked it up, his hands shaking, and opened it.

Inside was a picture of an old fort, something from the Southwest. It was a postcard, of the . . .

Damn, the Alamo, that's it.

San Antonio. He flipped the postcard and on the back was scribbled a date, a date just a month away.

He smiled. The chase was still on.

She asked me, "Will you continue your work for me, in San Antonio?"

"No," I said. "I can't keep on doing this. It's . . . it's too difficult, I'm sorry. I'm more used to black and white cases. This one's too gray for my taste."

"I understand," she said.

I said to her, "And there's nothing else you can do? No other doctors, therapy, medicines?"

She shook her head. "My brother is a cop, Mr. Foss. That's all he knows. He thinks he's doing something important, something that keeps him going. I can't stand the thought of him being locked up somewhere as a vegetable. At least this way, he's alive, he thinks he's performing a vital service."

I looked at her one more time. "Do you intend to keep on doing this year after year?"

"I do," she said.

"He might find out," I said.

She stayed silent for what seemed a very long time. She cleared her throat.

"He might not," she said. "And that's all I can do for him." ●

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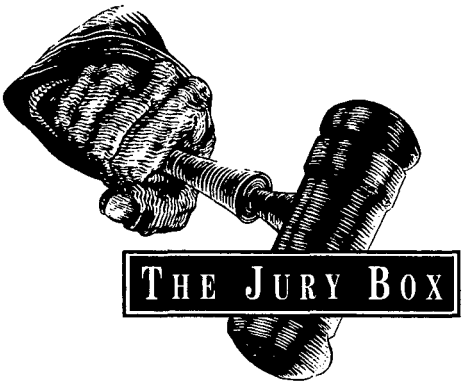

by Jon L. Breen

Single-author collections and anthologies have proliferated to such a degree that it's now easy to devote a whole column to the short story, a decision to which readers of this magazine, the home of fine short stories for almost 60 years, should find no reason to object.

**** Ed Gorman: *Famous Blue Raincoat,* Crippen & Landru, P.O. Box 9315, Norfolk, VA 23505; $17 trade paper, $42 limited hardcover. Gorman's sixth collection is the first to be entirely comprised of crime stories. The dozen selections, four from *EQMM,* include one tale about 1890's Cedar Rapids policewoman Anna Tolan, two about 1950's small-town lawyer Cody McCain and his Wolfe/Goodwinish relationship with the rubberband-shooting Judge Eleanor Whitney, and one about private eye Jack Dwyer. Enjoyable as these are, Gorman is at his very best in non-series stories like "Black Sheep," "The Closing Circle," and "The Long Way Back," studies of painfully real people in recognizable human dilemmas.

**** Bob Huffman: *Legal Fictions,* Creative Arts, 833 Bancroft Way, Berkeley, CA 94710; $13.95. An Ohio attorney manages to achieve an astonishing depth of character and variety of incident in stories as short (fourteen tales in a 114-page collection) as these deftly written accounts of the American legal system. The basic theme is that the system doesn't work—or, at best, works in spite of itself. Best story in a strong group may be "Arraignment," in which an alcoholic lawyer faces a DUI charge.

*** Janwillem van de Wetering: *The Amsterdam Cops: Collected Stories,* SOHO, $22. Eight of these 13 short stories previously appeared in *The Sergeant's Cat* (1987), which also included six non-series tales. Most feature Adjutant Grijpstra and Sgt. de Gier, with occasional and usually brief appearances by their elderly

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boss the Commissaris, who is featured solo in "Heron Island." The best of these are van de Wetering novels-in-miniature, with the quirky personalities, devious plot turns, and off-trail observations of people, animals, and plant life found in the book-length cases. Though I prefer earlier (and more nearly conventional) tales like "The Deadly Egg" and "Six This, Six That" to later and weirder ones like "The Letter in the Peppermint Jar," the whole collection displays the author's unique talents to advantage.

*** Joe Gores: *Speak of the Devil,* Five Star, $20.95. Gores's stories cover a remarkably wide range, from pure detection to supernatural horror, private eyes to gangsters, nostalgia to futuristic science fiction. The 14 in this collection recycle seven from *Mostly Murder* (1992). The only story from that collection not in this one is from the DKA Files series, soon to be collected separately by Crippen & Landru.

*** Stuart M. Kaminsky: *Hidden and Other Stories,* Five Star, $21.95. The very prolific Kaminsky is as versatile as Gores, offering pastiches of Doyle and Chandler; settings from nineteenth-century St. Petersburg to 1940's Hollywood; moods lighthearted and grim; forms from supernatural horror to classical detection. All 12 from his 1991 collection *Opening Shots* recur here. The four added raise the batting average considerably, especially the chilling and unpredictable title story, about the mass murder of a family.

Master's Choice (Berkley, $21.95), edited by Lawrence Block, has an interesting anthological angle: Each contributor introduces a favorite story of his/her own plus a favorite by another writer who provided inspiration. There are some surprises: Harlan Ellison picks Jacques Futrelle's "The Problem of Cell 13"; and Tony Hillerman cites a writer younger than he, though longer in the field, Joe Gores. Other pairings (selector's name first): Stephen King and Joyce Carol Oates, Peter Lovesey and Donald E. Westlake, Ed Gorman and Stephen Crane, Joan Hess and Judith Garner, John Lutz and William Fryer Harvey, Bill Pronzini and Benjamin Appel, editor Block and John O'Hara. A second volume is promised for next year.

Till Death Do Us Part (Berkley, $6.99), edited by Jill M. Morgan and Martin H. Greenberg, commissioned original stories by crime writers and their spouses. While it would be immodest to sing the praises of the contribution from Rita and me, I can commend some others to your attention. A couple of two-pro teams, Marcia Muller/Bill Pronzini (in "The Dying Time") and Robert J. Randisi/Marthayn Pelegrimas (in "I Love Everything about You") offer fresh variations of the old spousal murder plot. Lynne Wood Block and Lawrence

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Block confront burglar/bookseller Bernie Rhodenbarr with a locked-library problem in "The Burglar Who Smelled Smoke," while Judy and Bill Crider's "At the Hop" offers a locked-men's-room mystery that is Queenian in more ways than one. Joe and Karen Lansdale may gross you out with "Screw Up," a darkly comic tale of serial murder, while Gary and Martine Brandner present a droll horror fantasy Stephen King could be proud of in "The Munchies." Barbara and John Lutz's "Traveling Alone" is a woman-in-jeopardy story with a windup so deftly set up you'll admire it even if you see it coming. Each story is preceded by a picture of the happy authorial couple. (In a reversal of usual practice, 16 of the 18 stories appeared in an audiocassette version [Durkin Hayes, $29.99] a year ahead of the book.)

Writers reading their own works on tape is not unusual, but a famous author reading the work of others may be unique. In the audio version of *The Best American Mystery Stories 1999* (Houghton Mifflin, $25), guest editor Ed McBain reads in a pleasant, expressive, New-York-accented voice, his own very entertaining introduction plus four of the seven selected stories, beginning with "Bech Noir," pointed literary satire combined with ingenious serial murder by John Updike, a surprising author to turn up in a mystery anthology but (as he reveals elsewhere) a fan in his youth of Ellery Queen and other detective fiction writers. McBain also reads Brendan DuBois's excellent "Netmail"; L.L. Thrasher's deservedly Edgar-nominated "Sacrifice"; and Phillip M. Margolin's cleverly conceived "The Jailhouse Lawyer." Lawrence Block's "Keller's Last Refuge" and Gary Krist's "An Innocent Bystander" are read by their authors, while Kristin Kilian reads "Secret, Silent" by Joyce Carol Oates. All the stories are first-rate. To read the authors' own illuminating comments, plus another dozen selections, you'll need the print version (Houghton Mifflin, $27.50).

When favorite series characters stop, for whatever reason, appearing in novels, new short stories can sometimes allay the reader's sense of loss. K.K. Beck's charming flapper sleuth Iris Cooper has a new roaring-twenties adventure, "Hollywood Homicide," in *More Murder, They Wrote* (Berkley, $6.99), edited by Elizabeth Foxwell and Martin H. Greenberg. A casualty of the tough male private eye's current unfashionableness, Wayne D. Dundee's Joe Hannibal has a solid new case in *Tuck Tip* (Gryphon Double Novel #20, Gryphon Books, P.O. Box 209, Brooklyn, NY 11228-0209; $12). The 72-page paperback also includes an older Hannibal story, "The Harsh Light of Day," and on the flip side, *Three Parts,* a trio of stories about San Francisco cops Dean Chan and Amy Villagomez by Derek Muk.

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NEXT ISSUE...

Halfway House
BY MICHAEL GILBERT

The Spirit Birds
BY CLARK HOWARD

Girl Talk
BY MARILYN TODD

Maureen Welsh
BY PETER TURNBULL

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Breakthrough dieting technique uses metabolic enhancers so you can lose unwanted pounds—*in just six days!*

by Anne Regalia

European wisdom about cleansing the body by periodically abstaining from solid foods led to the development of the Six-Day BioDiet, a program of fruit and vegetable juice meals and metabolic enhancers that cleanse impurities from your body and take off unwanted pounds in just six days!

This wisdom led to the development of the Six-Day BioDiet, a program of fruit and vegetable juice meals and metabolic enhancers that cleanse impurities from your body and take off up to 14 pounds in six days!

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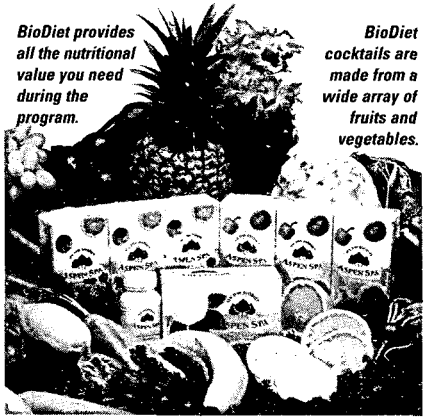

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TECHNOLOGY UPDATE

Finally—a "cure" for bad breath!

For years, the cause of chronic bad breath has been misdiagnosed, but a dentist's research has led to TheraBreath™, a dramatic treatment system that works naturally and effectively.

It is estimated that over 80 million people worldwide suffer from bad breath, or halitosis. In the past, treatment has consisted of masking the odor with mouthwashes or mints, flooding the mouth with alcohol-based rinses, or the latest craze, popping pills that claim to cure the problem in the stomach. None of these treatments work, because halitosis is caused by bacteria on the back of the tongue and upper throat that produce sulfurous gases. The way to stop bad breath is to stop this process, and this is the secret behind the revolutionary TheraBreath™ system.

A scientific solution. As a dentist with a degree in bacteriology, Dr. Harold Katz has been keenly aware of the widespread nature of this problem. It was not until his daughter came to him about her halitosis, however, that he began to research the problem in earnest. His studies led him to an amazing discovery about the source of bad breath: it does not originate in the digestive system, and the food you eat has no direct effect on your breath.

Dear Dr. Katz,

Our son has had a breath problem for years. He tried mouthwashes and mints. We took him to doctors and dentists, and even had his tonsils removed. Nothing worked, until he tried your product. I am so thankful and thrilled that you found the solution to his problem. You'll never know how much you changed his life!

—M.C., Los Angeles

Certain foods, however, contribute to the production of sulfurous gases in the back of the mouth. Mints and mouthwashes intended to mask or prevent bad breath actually worsen the condition because sugar and alcohol dry out the mouth. Many common medications for everything from high blood pressure to depression have the same drying effect, resulting in the formation of odorous gases. Mucous from post-nasal drip contains dense proteins that are full of sulfur. Some treatments for halitosis contain Sodium Lauryl Sulfate, which can cause canker sores. The only effective means of eliminating the sulfur gas production is to introduce oxygen to the bacteria, causing them to produce tasteless, odorless sulfates.

Effective, safe and natural. At his California Breath Clinic, Dr. Katz has perfected a five-step program for treating halitosis. By using these products on a regular basis, chronic halitosis sufferers can end their problem. The TheraBreath system eliminates the problem of bitter or sour taste in the mouth, improves general periodontal health and will even whiten teeth. TheraBreath has a mild spearmint flavor that tastes great and creates pleasant, neutral breath. It contains no SLS compounds, so you will not suffer from an increase in canker sores or any other side effects. These products are all-natural and simply introduce a greater amount of oxygen into the mouth's chemistry.

Try it risk-free. Try the TheraBreath System for yourself with our risk-free home trial. If you are not fully satisfied, just return it within 30 days for a full refund.

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